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**The Evaluation of an Evidence-Based  
Approach to Student Retention.**

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**U2219218**

**Submitted for Doctor of Education (EdD)**

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## **Abstract**

Student retention has become an increasing concern in higher education over the last decade, particularly in those institutions committed to widening access and participation. Prompted by an increased focus on retention outlined in the White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES, 2003), institutions responded by introducing specific measures to address attrition. This study examines an evidence-based approach to improving student retention taken by one post '92 university in the UK, through its retention strategy. It explores the origins of evidence-based practice and debates around educational research and the policy/practice nexus as a means of understanding the context within which the retention strategy was introduced in 2003. The evaluation examines the management and implementation of a number of initiatives, located both centrally and within faculties and departments. The evidence demonstrating implementation and impact is identified and judgement made in relation to the reliability and validity. In addition, how the evidence is used or otherwise by the institution to review and reflect on the impact of its retention strategy is analysed. The focus of the study is summarised by the research questions,

1. What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of its reliability and validity?
2. How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform future strategic development?
3. How does evidence demonstrate an impact on student retention?



The study draws from research on student retention and engagement in both the UK and US particularly that of Kuh *et al.* (2005), Tinto (1975) and Yorke (1999) to develop a theoretical framework within which to evaluate the strategy. The work of Berger (2002) and Bush (1995) is influential in expanding existing models on student retention, to examine the relationships between organisational structures and behaviours and the impact on the introduction of retention initiatives.

This study applies a realist evaluation methodology (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) to a sub-group of initiatives introduced as part of the retention strategy. The argument that evaluation can be undertaken as educational research is presented, and that realistic evaluation has relevance in acknowledging the complex nature of evidence and the importance of context. This is corroborated by the outcomes of the research, summarised within a realistic framework, identifying explanatory mechanisms, which contribute to theory on organisational development, education management and leadership, student retention and engagement.

The research findings identify the nature of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, the latter including significant evidence, much of which was incidental and informal. The recognition and use of evidence at institutional levels is analysed. In addition, this study examines the role of complexity in relation to academic management and organisational change. The role of academic managers in supporting and facilitating change is considered alongside the role of individual practitioners engaged to introduce and embed

initiatives. The findings identify organisational behaviours, management models conducive or otherwise, and present recommendations for future practice.

**Keywords:** student retention; evidence-based practice; realistic evaluation; academic management; organisational behaviour; complexity.

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## **1. Introduction**

The White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES, 2003) outlined to the higher education community, government expectations regarding access, widening participation and student retention. Initially this included the provision for an 'Access Regulator' with the power to withhold permission for universities to charge 'top up' fees should they fall short of their access commitments and financially penalise universities with high student drop-out rates. The emphasis of the paper was on supporting students recruited through widening participation strategies through to the successful completion of their degree, hence deterring universities from recruiting merely to 'make up numbers'. The widening participation funding stream was to be used for widening access and supporting, in particular, those vulnerable students recruited through such initiatives. This led to universities scrutinising their activities and in response, putting in place policies on access and strategies for retention. It was within this national climate that the retention strategy was developed and introduced at the University, which is the subject of this study in 2003.

The University, although successful in embracing widening participation and recruiting students from diverse backgrounds had been less successful in managing attrition. Based on the HESA data for 2002 attrition across the university was 26%. Retention was, and remains one of four key priorities, with a strategy and three-year action plan introduced in 2003.

The strategy stated the 'need for an evidence-based approach to retention' as well as the 'need to coordinate and evaluate what we do better'. This approach had much to do with public discussion and promotion by government about



evidence-based practice (EBP) and evidence-informed policy and practice (EIPP). The philosophy of 'what matters is what works' (Davies *et al.* 2000) articulated the government approach to research and development in education. A further factor influencing this approach was the necessity to improve the University's position in national league tables. In 2003, the University had 'one of the worst drop-out rates in the sector' (University retention strategy, 2003) and had been in this position for some years. The University's position near the bottom of these tables was a considerable concern. The introduction of 'top up' fees, coupled with increased competition locally from colleges of higher education, several seeking university status, added further impetus for managed change.

## 2. Rationale and Focus

In a review of research on student retention, Tinto (2006) commented that,

‘Most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation’

(Tinto, 2006 p5)

This was based on a review of research carried out over the last forty years in the United States. Tinto (2006 p7) argued the need for a ‘model of institutional action’, which would need to be multi-layered in that it ‘connected practices for students to actions which provide support for staff.’ The strategy attempted this and brought together recommendations from a range of groups within the university namely:

- Academic Policy and Planning Committee
- Widening Participation Committee
- University Management Team
- Learning and Teaching Committee
- Academic Standards Committee
- Central Induction Planning Party.

Although there was consultation, strategy was developed by senior management and remained the responsibility of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic). The planned approach to implementation and need for evaluation was consistent with ‘strategy as design’, (Johnson and Scholes, 2002 p143)

and as such, change would be expected to occur through implementation. The strategy was based on the following key principles

- The need for an evidence – based approach to retention
- The need for a transparent and affordable resource strategy
- The need to recognise the diversity of faculties and departments and allow local strategies within a corporate framework
- The need for full transparency in local, departmental arrangements
- The need to recognise and reward success and share good practice.
- The need to manage quality and standards

The strategy identified an institution-wide approach to tackling retention with interventions in the form of initiatives and projects located centrally and at faculty level. Appendix 1, demonstrates the range of interventions, from discrete projects to faculty posts, and the levels at which they operated within the university.

My appointment in late 2004 as Retention Strategy Coordinator, based in the Academic Development Unit (ADU), was to support and coordinate activity across the institution. A further part of the role was to review and evaluate initiatives. The ADU has responsibility for the delivery of several university strategies in addition to retention, including Learning and Teaching, E-Learning, Research-Informed Teaching and Supporting Professional Standards.

The institution is a post '92 University and one of the largest in the UK with approximately 30,000 FTE students. The 20 departments are organised within

four faculties. There is a flat management structure with Heads of Department and Deans of Faculty. A partnership network of further education colleges also linked into retention strategy initiatives.

The strategy stated the need for an evidence-based approach to retention. As initiatives developed requiring further resources, it was necessary to make judgements. This involved scrutinising reports, documentation and data to determine what constituted evidence that might demonstrate how effective, or not, a particular initiative was. My efforts to date had raised questions around the *nature of the evidence*. Quantitative data on student withdrawal, progression and achievement and student satisfaction, used at institution, faculty and department levels appeared to have credibility with academic managers and were assumed valid. However, evidence of the impact of Student Officers (SOs) or the Peer Mentoring scheme (appendix 1) was different and more difficult to understand. In order to evaluate the strategy using an evidence-based approach it was necessary to identify and define the available evidence. This led to my initial research question on evidence-based practice, particularly *what constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of its reliability and validity?*

The second question explored *how evidence is utilised at local and institutional levels to inform future strategic development*. This followed on from the first question, looking at how the evidence was used, whether some types of evidence were more readily used and to what extent this changed practice and policy. Understanding the local contexts was important in answering this question, as different initiatives and interventions operated at different levels



within the institution. It was necessary to examine this in terms of organisational behaviour to understand how evidence is used and change takes place. This gives an indication as to the extent to which strategy is 'designed' or 'emergent' (Johnson and Scholes, 2002 p142-3).

To my mind there needs to be a link between the evaluation of evidence, how it is acted upon or not, and the impact or otherwise on retention. Therefore, to evaluate an evidence-based approach to retention the final research question was *how the evidence demonstrates an impact on student retention*. Much of the research around retention in the UK borrowed theoretical perspectives from the US, in particular, Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure cited by Yorke (1999 p3) as the 'market leader'. This focussed on the importance of integration both socially and academically. It was necessary to discuss this in relation to later research that expanded the theory taking into account external and institutional factors, and the students' perspective. The work of Kuh *et al.* (2005) on 'student engagement' was important, and to my mind, equally relevant in evaluating the impact of initiatives on student persistence.

### **3. Review of the Literature**

#### **3.1 Evidence – Based Policy and Practice**

The origin of debate around evidence–based policy and practice in education can be traced back to comments made by David Hargreaves in a lecture to the Teacher Training Agency in 1996. (Sebba, 2003). He argued that educational research was inadequate in that it did not provide the type of evidence required for evidence-based practice (EBP), more importantly it was non–cumulative (Sebba, 2003). Educational research was unfavourably compared to approaches used in medical research.

In 1998, two reviews of the quality of educational research were published, commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment and OFSTED respectively. The former, a review by Hillage *et al*, (1998) looking at the direction, funding and impact of educational research concluded the relationship between research, policy and practice should be improved. The link between research and its use by policymakers and practitioners was poor, in some instances the quality of research was inadequate and an over emphasis on short term evaluations meant that research tended to follow rather than lead policy. The report concluded that there was no systematic process for using evidence from research in policymaking. Sebba (2004) cites two key themes from the reports namely the need for

- better use of the current evidence base
- greater investment in a high quality research base for the future

The Tooley report (Tooley and Darby, 1998) commissioned by OFSTED was also critical, in that it concluded that a significant percentage of educational research reports had methodological defects.

Government responded to these criticisms and addressed them through its educational research strategy, increasing funding for research projects, particularly investing in systematic reviews of research literature and longitudinal studies. This was influenced by the work of the Cochrane Collaboration and EIPP in medicine. Research databases such as CERUK (Current Educational Research in the UK) aimed to make information more accessible to researchers. The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating (EPPI) Centre established at the Institute of Education developed a methodology for undertaking systematic reviews. Sebba (2003 p5) argues that the 'contribution of reviews to a cumulative evidence base are a major step forward' and favours the use of systematic reviews where there is a sufficient body of research. It is within this political context that the retention strategy was developed in the University reinforcing the need, at an institutional level, for evidence to inform both strategic development and future practice.

### **3.2 What Constitutes Evidence?**

The emphasis on systematic review as a means of fulfilling the need for a cumulative evidence base had both its advocates and critics. Bell *et al.* (2003) argued that borrowing a methodology from medicine predicated on random controlled trials (RCTs) and adapting it to education, created a hierarchy of research studies. Pre-eminent were RCTs, followed by well designed quantitative and qualitative studies, followed by practitioner research and



teacher enquiry. A key feature of EBP appeared to be quantitative research. Deem (2006) agreed the preference for quantitative rather than qualitative research by policymakers was well established (Deem, 2006 p221).

Additionally, there was the assumption that by using control conditions for an intervention and measuring the outcomes it was easier to argue that the intervention had the desired effect. In this way, policy was justified and legitimised (Clegg, 2005). Critics of systematic review (Hammersley, 2001, 2005, Clegg, 2005) have contributed to the debate about what constitutes evidence in educational contexts, arguing that the discourse around 'what works' coupled with the need for 'measurable outcomes' and ensuring 'value for money' dominates how research outputs are judged and valued. Hammersley (2005 p320) argued for the use of the term 'research-based policy and practice' on the basis that much of the 'evidence' referred to in EBP was *research* evidence. Moreover, where research conclusions were used to inform policy and practice, subsequent outcomes would be desirable because they were based on research. Where the retention strategy was concerned, this was in theory plausible. However where retention strategy initiatives were concerned any 'conclusions' or evidence presented in reports was unlikely to have been developed within a pre-determine research framework.

Responding to the Higher Education Academy's call for 'a professional, evidence-based approach to improving the students' experiences' the Mike Daniel Symposium took *an evidence-based approach to higher education* as its theme (Ramsden, 2004, quoted in Jackson, 2004). The symposium summarised the problems with 'evidence' as often incomplete, complex, value-



laden and although available, possibly not fit for purpose (Jackson, 2004 p16). Despite these issues, the report concluded that in making decisions and informing policy and practice in higher education it was important to consider a wide range of evidence. This included 'descriptive, contextual and incidental and the more factual, objective, analytical and synthetic' forms of evidence (Jackson, 2004 p17).

The predominant theme apparent in research literature on EBP was the importance of *context*. It was argued extensively by critics that EBP can be a broad-brush approach and did not take into consideration the contexts in which the research was undertaken (Clegg, 2005, Bell *et al.* 2003, Hammersley, 2005). This could be addressed by using a 'multi-dimensional model that encompasses context, culture and leadership in organisations' (Clegg, 2005 p425), that involved examining the impact of social and political relationships on the use of evidence in informing policy and practice.

In advocating a broad definition to what constituted 'evidence' for the purpose of this research, it was possible to include context-specific information as well as a range of quantitative and qualitative data. This provided the richer, more appropriate evidence base from which to examine practice within an 'organisational learning framework' as described by Borden (2004 p9).

### **3.3 Student Retention**

Research into why students leave higher education and more latterly, why they stay is extensive, with much of the earlier work undertaken in the US. Retention

increasingly became an issue in the UK as the HE sector expanded. Much UK research was based on theory developed in the US.

The study of university and college student departure in the US yielded a number of theoretical frameworks. The pre-eminent model, Tinto's interactionalist theory (1975) was based on the assumption that students entered higher education with a set of individual characteristics, expectations and intentions and these affected their commitment to the institution as well as their potential departure. The extent, to which students were integrated, both socially and academically further affected goals and commitment, and subsequently determined persistence or withdrawal. Further research into the organisational, individual and social factors affecting student retention (Tinto, 1993, Astin, 1984, Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980) reinforced and developed the theory, influencing work in the UK.

The theory had its critics, Metzner and Bean (1987) further developed Tinto's model to include external factors and tested this on part-time students. They concluded that a key factor influencing student drop-out was low entry scores which led to poor academic rather than social integration and a low commitment to study. Yorke (1999) also argued that the original model ignored the impact of external factors on students' perceptions and commitment and gave no recognition of the effect of the institution on withdrawal. Addressing this in his own research into student departure, Yorke looked at broader range indicators focusing on 'why students leave' and potential factors which identify 'students at risk'. This work has been influential in determining retention interventions in UK institutions. An example in the University is the Return to Study Project, which

contacts students after they have withdrawn and offers them a second chance at studying in higher education. The origin of the project was based on the assumption that students can make ill-informed decisions about their choice of course. Yorke (1999 p38) cited 'choosing the wrong course' as a primary reason for students leaving higher education. Whilst Tinto, based on his research in the United States, developed the original interactivist model, Longden (2006) in relation to research in this field in the UK argues

'This interactivist model provides a valuable structure for viewing the process of retention, despite the reservations that the model was developed within a different academic higher education culture and context.'

(Longden, 2006 p176)

The contexts and culture within which this study was undertaken will not only vary in terms of the composition of the student body, organisational structures and behaviours, learning and teaching strategies and so forth from that in the United States but also from other UK HE institutions.

Much research in the UK became predicated on the identification of 'risk factors', once identified these could be addressed and retention improved. Recent research by Yorke and Longden (2007) into the student experience in higher education reiterated there was no one 'silver bullet' to resolve retention. Identifying students 'at risk' appeared to me to be a deficit model, implying a failing on the students' part, e.g. low entry qualifications, family caring responsibilities, part – time working and so forth. Subsequent studies were



focused on specific learner groups such as mature students, part-time students, ethnicity, and disability to identify specific 'at risk' factors. Nutt (2005) acknowledged retention as complex and attended to 'critical moments'. Here the combination of 'risk' factors for a student at any one time would lead to withdrawal. This became indicative of research in the UK and remains so largely.

This was reflected across the University as most retention initiatives and projects focussed on social integration and pastoral support aimed at different groups. The evidence- base for determining these initiatives reflects the research that was available when the strategy was initiated in 2003. The University recruited a significant number of students from widening participation backgrounds as defined by HEFCE, at the point of the study the benchmark for the institution was 17%. These were students from specified social groups and postcode areas and more likely to be a first time entrant to higher education from their family. The University had a stated commitment to widening participation as part of its mission statement, consequently encouraging applications from those from groups under-represented in higher education, many of whom studied part-time. A significant number were local students who travelled to study rather than lived on-campus.

Research by Yorke and Thomas (2003) specifically addressed why some institutions were more successful at retaining students from under-represented groups than others and aimed to determine key factors for success. Their study identified six institutions, which exceeded benchmarks for widening participation and student completion. A key factor was the commitment by the institution to 'a

broad conception of the student experience' (Yorke and Thomas, 2003) which was defined under a number of themes including, pre-entry and early engagement with students by the institution, not only at the point of application but through earlier interventions such as outreach activity. The pre-entry summer school scheme, one of the retention initiatives aimed to prepare students socially and academically prior to entry. In addition, Cook (2009) stressed the importance of a conversation between the prospective student and the institution to ensure students are fully informed about the institution as well as their chosen course. Whereas choosing the wrong course was identified as a 'risk factor (Yorke, 1999), the findings of the First Year Student Experience Survey (Yorke and Longden, 2008) indicate that students are also likely to withdraw because the institution did not live up to their expectations. Likewise, Longden (2006) as a potential risk factor cites incompatibility between the student and institution.

A second factor was the importance of induction programmes in helping students to engage with the institution and support them during transition to HE, Longden (2006) similarly stressed the importance of induction to manage students lack of academic preparation, citing 'bridging' programmes as a possible intervention. Research by Kuh *et al* (2005), Cook (2009), and the STAR Project at Ulster University, reinforces the importance of transition programmes in improving student retention at early stages of their higher education experience.

Yorke and Thomas (2003 p72) conclude that the success of the six institutions in retaining students is attributable to, 'in part to deliberate actions by HEIs in

respect of students from socio-economic groups' and that a range of interventions may play a part. However, senior managers had difficulty in providing firm evidence of the success of any particular intervention above another. They conclude with suggestions of what interventions an institution might consider as likely to have a positive effect on student retention, the retention initiatives introduced as part of the strategy are concurrent with the findings here

- 'an institutional climate supportive in various ways of students' development, that is perceived as 'friendly'
- an emphasis on support leading up to, and during, the critically important first year of study
- recognition that the pattern of students' engagement in higher education was changing, and a preparedness to respond positively to this in various ways.'

(Yorke and Thomas, 2003 p72)

Other factors cited were academic related referring to formative assessment and social aspects of learning, which did not appear to have been influential in the development of the retention strategy.

There is congruence between research findings in the UK and US, although contexts and cultures may vary considerably between institutions and higher education systems, the broad themes considered key have some similarity. Bean (2005) identifies nine themes of student retention drawn on empirical and theoretical research in the United States over the past thirty years and



discusses how these may affect retention. Some of these, such as attitude and intention are developed from the individual perspective and relate to a student's intention to stay or leave and their attitude to both the institution and to being a student. This 'institutional' fit reflects the findings of Cook *et al* discussed earlier. Similarly, social factors and the opportunity to develop social networks and friendship are important in developing engagement and building confidence. The peer-mentoring scheme as an intervention specifically sought to support this activity and encourage social integration. Likewise, the mature students society and work of student officers aimed to involve students in activities, which helped them to 'belong'. Bean (2005) states that faculty staff are equally important in this respect, with accessibility and strategies for personal tutoring playing a part. The final theme worth considering in relation to the retention strategy is the bureaucratic factor (Bean, 2005). Within the bureaucratic context Bean refers to students' interface with formal organisation systems, such as admissions, finance, student services and so forth, stating that

'Failure to negotiate the formal requirements can be disastrous. Violating rules (failure to pay tuition, failure to attend class, failure to behave appropriately in a residence hall) can result in expulsion.'

(Bean, 2005 p230)

The need to institutions to provide services in a student – friendly manner is important in helping students to develop positive relationships with the institution. Through the retention strategy, the One Stop Information Shop aimed to provide an accessible facility for students to help them work their way

through the University's formal processes and was purposefully staffed by recent graduates, who could empathise with current students.

### **3.4 Student Engagement**

Students' perceptions of higher education had recently become a focus for research in relation to retention. In the US, the annual National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) used by over 850 institutions generated significant data on 'student engagement' (Kuh *et al*, 2004). The questionnaire, to first and final year students, covered aspects of their experience that indicated the extent to which they 'engaged' with higher education. This was defined 'as the degree to which students participate in educational practices that are linked to the valued outcomes of higher education' (Kuh and Umbach, 2004 p39). It was broader than the concept of 'social and academic integration' discussed earlier, in that it included aspects of citizenship such as voluntary work and civic responsibility. From this perspective, the argument was that a more 'engaged' student was more likely to persist. Consequently, in my opinion, increased student engagement, as the outcome of a retention initiative, was as valid as evidence to improve retention, as an improvement in retention data itself.

However, what students 'do' also depended on institutional expectations and the environment created to encourage engagement. The relationship between student and institution was key. Researching into the relationship between faculty use of effective educational practices and student engagement with them, Kuh *et al*. (2004) found some positive correlations. The research, based on large-scale surveys covering 137 institutions, concluded that the next step was to 'discover how institutions cultivate and reinforce the attitudes and



behaviours associated with effective educational practices.’ Kuh *et al.* (2004 p27)

### **3.5 Links between Organisational Behaviour and Retention**

In order to examine how evidence was used within the University, it was necessary to consider organisational contexts and behaviours. My experience to date, led me to believe staff within the University perceived the term *retention* differently. Those involved in centrally located projects were often enthusiasts regarding initiatives positively as support for students. Academic managers faced with different issues, for example, under pressure to recruit students and subsequently retain them, often appeared to view both in conflict with one another and had different perspectives. Potentially the practices and values of the institution as evidenced by staff had a significant effect on the student experience and worthy of inclusion as part of the study.

The impact of organisational behaviour on retention had been the subject of few studies. Braxton and Brier (1989 p54) using Tinto’s interactionalist theory plus additional ‘organisational behaviour’ variables namely, *institutional communication, participation in decision making and fairness in policy and rule enforcement*, found a positive correlation between organisational attributes and both academic and social integration. A later longitudinal study, Berger and Braxton, (1998 p108) using the same sets of variables and path analysis methodology concluded a positive correlation between all three organisational attributes and either peer relations and faculty relations or both. The studies were carried out in a low selective urban university and high selective, private, research-intensive university respectively. Research in the US was almost

exclusively quantitative and usually institution-specific, making generalisation difficult, however the conclusions drawn from these studies indicated organisational behaviours are likely to impact on student retention, in two different institutions.

In 2001, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education commented

‘The evidence shows that there are unacceptable variations in the rate of ‘drop–out’ which appears to be linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than to the background or nature of the students recruited’.

House of Commons Select Committee on Education and  
Employment Report (2001), *Higher Education: Student Retention*

In her case study on student retention in a modern UK university, Thomas (2002) considered the role of the institution. Two areas included were *university support services* and *academic experience*, the latter included staffs’ attitudes, assessment, timetabling, and flexibility. The study was essentially qualitative; the primary focus was on students’ perceptions from focus groups and a questionnaire. Thomas (2002 p431) used the term ‘institutional habitus’ to describe the ‘impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation’ to discuss the role of organisational behaviour in relation to retention. The research concluded that an institutional habitus that recognised *difference* was important in retaining students from diverse backgrounds. This further supported the argument for the

inclusion of organisational behaviour as part of a theoretical framework for student retention.

What is meant by the term ‘organisational behaviour’ was important. The notion of organisational behaviour can have different interpretations. Berger (2002) reinforced the idea that organisations do not behave, but the people within organisations behave according to collective organisational interests. Although there may be a dominant organisational structure with associated behaviours, different characteristics would be evident at different levels, created within sub cultures. In his literature review of empirical research linking retention and organisational behaviour, Berger (2002) employed five dimensions of behaviour derived from Bolman and Deal (1991) namely bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and systemic. An analysis of the review is summarised in table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Summary of research evidence linking organisational behaviours with retention**

<b>Organisational behaviour</b>	<b>Evidence of +ve effect on retention or student satisfaction</b>	<b>Evidence of -ve effect on retention or student satisfaction</b>
Bureaucratic (inconclusive effect)	High levels of organisation leads to greater student satisfaction. Higher levels of satisfaction leads to increased persistence	Impersonal contacts with administrators and staff leads to poor student integration
Collegial (positive)	Models of collegial behaviour are extended to students (fairness, communication and participation)	None found
Political (evidence is limited and indirect, inconclusive)		Highly competitive, low collegiate institutions do not involve students leading to low



		persistence. Highly competitive individuals and coalitions compete for limited resources and this leads to student dissatisfaction.
Symbolic (positive)	Higher levels of shared meaning amongst students particularly regarding institutional values and expectations leads to greater integration.	
Systemic (positive)	Greater structural connections to the external environment (i.e. graduate employment rates) create +ve external image and reputation affects recruitment and retention.  'image potency'	

Derived from Berger (2002, p11-14)

### 3.6 Management Models

Whereas Berger, Bolman and Deal focussed on organisational behaviour, it was also necessary to draw on a framework to define the management models, organizational structure and leadership styles, which operate at different levels within the institution. Bush (1995) identified management models, which relate closely to the organisational behaviours in Table 3.1. These are formal, political, subjective, ambiguity, cultural and collegial. In relation to each Bush identifies the leadership styles, processes for decision-making and means by which goals are achieved. Each has relevance in relation to my research in providing a greater understanding of the institutional and local contexts within which retention initiatives and activity is enacted. The summaries here are based on definitions by Bush (1995)

The formal management model is congruent with bureaucratic behaviour discussed earlier. The key features of this model are a clearly defined hierarchy where policy and goals are determined at institutional level and decision-making is based on achieving goals. There is an objective and rational approach to management, which can be perceived as 'top-down' by those working within the organisation.

Political models operate locally and it is at this sub-unit level that goals are determined rather than at institutional level. Dominant individuals or groups determine the goals and process by which they are achieved, decisions often arising out of conflict. There is a direct correlation with political behaviour described earlier creating a competitive environment.

Subjective models focus on the interests of the individual and goals can be determined at this level with the purpose being personal objectives rather than those of the institution. Whereas there is no direct correlation with organisational behaviours identified previously, this model is relevant to the research. A key feature of subjective models of management is the style of leadership, which focuses on individual attributes rather than the position within the organisation. Individuals can subvert institutional policy and practice to achieve their own goals, the perception by others is that of control.

Ambiguity models of management are so defined by uncertainty in how goals are determined or achieved. There is no clear leadership and a leader may emerge through participatory activity at local levels. The organizational

structure in this model is difficult to define also as it is dependant upon the relationships between groups or sub-units which may be uncertain. This model could have relevance in relation to understanding the contexts within which some centrally located retention initiatives are located.

The cultural model of management has some congruence with symbolic organisational behaviour. The focus here is on determined values and beliefs, which are recognised at institutional and sub unit levels. Goals are set in accordance with values and beliefs and the commitment to achieving these is evident at all levels. There is a focus on collective behaviour, similar to shared behaviours in a symbolic model.

Collegial management models have a particular focus on lateral, rather than vertical, structures within the organisation; one feature is a 'flattened' management hierarchy. This is relevant in relation to cross – institutional retention activity and understanding the operation of intra-institutional networks. The setting of goals and decision-making are achieved through consensus because of a collaborative and participative process. The related organisational behaviours are fairness, communication and participation. Bush (1995) states collegiality

'assumes that organisations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion leading to consensus. Power is shared amongst some or all members of the organisation who are thought to have a mutual understanding about the objectives of the institution'

(Bush, T. 1995 p55)



The definition of academic collegiality as described by Middlehurst and Elton (1992 p256) elaborates further stressing the importance of trust between the centre and faculties, departments and also the importance of 'communication, the need for open access to information and constant feedback on performance decisions and performance' as essential.

The role of a leader in this model is to promote consensus amongst fellow professionals and although they may not always personally agree with the decision or goal, will still give support. Consequently, leadership is exercised at all levels within the organisation and those with designated 'leadership' roles will lead and be led. In this respect collegial management models can make it potentially difficult to identify responsibility for decision-making as this is shared by the group, committee or sub-unit. Likewise, accountability can be difficult to determine.

Middlehurst and Elton (1992) also state the importance of academic collegiality in giving individuals the freedom to be creative. Creativity could be critical in enabling and encouraging changing practice in the implementation of retention initiatives in the institution.

Hellawell and Hancock (2001) comment that collegiality was the predominant management model in traditional UK universities, observing

'It has been widely accepted that the 'new' UK universities, established in general from the former polytechnics, have

managerial systems that are much more hierarchical in nature than the traditional collegial model'

(Hellowell and Hancock, 2001 p185)

In their study into the role of the middle manager in Higher Education, Hellowell and Hancock (2001, p188) found that whilst collegiality still appeared to exist within the university it tended to be at lower levels, further up the hierarchy it was 'often bypassed, subverted or simply ignored'. It was however, viewed by middle managers, i.e. Heads of Departments as the most effective form of decision making in Higher Education, capable of generating 'spontaneous creativity arising from shared ideas in a non-managerial environment' Hellowell and Hancock (2001 p190). This has relevance within the context of my research in that some initiatives were implemented through the formal management structure, whereas others were implemented laterally, from centre, across the university by individuals.

### **3.7 Complexity and Organisational Development.**

The University is one of the largest in the UK and the formal structure was discussed earlier. The retention strategy was developed to impact across the institution with some initiatives led centrally such as improvements to data management and the introduction of Faculty Retention Reports. Other initiatives were introduced at the level of faculty such as Retention Tutors or located centrally, Peer Mentoring. The strategy was multi-faceted and introduced into a complex organisational environment with the intention of creating the necessary change to improve student retention. In order to make sense of the data



analysis as it emerged, I had to review literature related to complexity and change in organisations.

Chaos theory developed simultaneously in several branches of science over the past forty years. It was concerned with the behaviour of complex systems and how small, barely apparent changes to these systems could have a significant impact on behaviour or patterns. Its development was facilitated by developments in computing technology, which made the study of complex patterns and systems possible for the first time. The approach was multi-disciplinary and holistic in looking for connectivity, networks and patterns and a move away from linear 'cause and effect' thinking. It was from here that complexity theory evolved from the study of complex dynamic systems deriving 'complexity' as the nature of systems studied (McMillan, 2008). As with chaos theory, it has been widely applied beyond the sciences to develop our understanding of social systems, politics, psychology and management. The main concepts of complexity theory based on McMillan, (2008 p58-66) are:

- Self-organisation / self-organizing systems, here a complex system has the ability to self-organise to create more highly complex systems, in effect renewing itself spontaneously creating new structures and behaviours. These are non-linear systems without any central control.
- Complex adaptive systems: These differ from the above in that they have the ability to adapt and take on new meaning or learning, this is a continuous process aimed at anticipating the future.
- Emergence and co-evolution: This is a consequence of complex adaptive systems in that they create opportunities for the emergence of new knowledge, thinking and behaviour, which is often unexpected.

For the purpose of this research, I have focussed on the application of complexity theory to three areas; which I have termed knowledge creation and learning; the individual and the organisation; self-organisation, emergence and participation.

### **3.7.1 Knowledge Creation and Learning**

I have stated earlier that some of the evidence regarding retention initiatives was likely to be informal in nature and possibly anecdotal, in that it arises from dialogue between individuals employed to work on the initiative and others within the University. In this respect, the evidence was a form of knowledge created through sharing a learning experience. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) identify two types of knowledge at the level of the individual namely tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. The former is located in the individual and subjective; it is hard to communicate and shows itself in the form of a skill or beliefs, often transmitted through mimicry. Much thinking on managing knowledge is dependant on the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. This explicit knowledge is subsequently captured and utilised for the benefit of the organisation.

‘Mainstream thinking is that tacit knowledge is transmitted by imitation or conveyed by the stories members of a community of practice tell one another’

(Stacey, 2001 p206)

Explicit knowledge, is easily transmitted, taking a numerical, visual or written format and includes knowledge shared through dialogue. Here tacit knowledge

has been transformed into identified symbols and is codified making it accessible to others (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

The learning experience, which takes place at the level of the individual, can be distinguished using the mental models developed by Argyris and Schon (1978) namely model 1, single-loop learning and model 2, double-loop learning. Single-loop learning involves the set of tacit assumptions held by an individual, which they seek to defend and withhold; here there is a resistance to dialogue.

‘Model 1 is a set of tacit assumptions that lead individuals into debating mode in which they seek to win and not lose and in which they withhold information in order not to embarrass or hurt themselves’.

(Stacey, 2001 p20)

There is often a distinction made in this context between discussion and dialogue where discussion is competitive and potentially confrontational and dialogue is collaborative and cooperative (Senge, 1990). It is only in the latter context, learning can take place as both values and beliefs are withheld, and true dialogue can ensue. The process of learning and reflection is a fundamental feature of double-loop learning, mental model 2. In addition, the learning takes place collaboratively and tacit knowledge, through sharing, becomes explicit. There is a requirement for collaboration and interaction between individuals in group and social contexts, much of which may be informally organised.



Recent researchers on knowledge creation argue the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge is deceptive (Tsoukas, 1997, Stacey, 2001) as they are indistinguishable and interrelated. Tsoukas draws a distinction between propositional knowledge as articulated through models, prototypes, procedures and narrative knowledge articulated as narratives and stories. This was relevant to some of the evidence identified in this study, which was anecdotal by nature. Interestingly Tsoukas (1997) argues this is the more important type of knowledge in relation to organisational development, being socially constructed and relational rather than individual. Weick (1979 p133) refers to the co-creation of knowledge between groups of individuals through dialogue and stories as 'sense-making'. It is how they learn, reflect and begin to understand complex situations and contexts. Stacey (2001) argues

'Far from mistrusting informal exchanges between people, such ordinary communicative action in the living present is to be valued as the very process in which knowledge arises. This view leads not to search for alternatives to informal exchanges but to attaching much greater importance to ordinary conversational life in organizations'

(Stacey, 2001 p222)

### **3.7.2 The Individual and the Organization.**

Stacey (2001) in his 'priority and primacy' debate reflects on the relationship between the individual and the organisation and in particular mainstream thinking that these are different phenomena. In terms of knowledge creation there is an assumption that they operate on different ontological levels and



knowledge is created at the individual level for translation and use by the ‘organization’. This is articulated as ‘rationalist’ teleology and compared here to ‘formative’ teleology

**Table 3.2. Definitions of Rationalist Teleology and Formative Teleology**

Concept	Rationalist Teleology	Formative Teleology
Movement towards a future that is:	A goal chosen by reasoning autonomous humans	A mature form implied at the start of movement or in the movement. Implies a final state that can be known in advance
Movement for the sake of:	Realizing chosen goals	Revealing, realizing or sustaining a mature or final form of identity of self. This is an actualization of form or self that is already there in some sense.
Kind of self-organization implied:	None	Repetitive unfolding of macro-patterns already enfolded in micro interaction
Nature and origin of variation/change is:	Designed change through rational exercise of human choice to get it right in terms of universals.	Shift from one given form to another due to context. Change is stages of development given in advance.

(Stacey, 2001 p27)

The development of the University’s strategy and its introduction was commensurate with a rationalist teleology in that it was created by the PVC, with some consultation, and affected on the University in order to create ‘managed’ change.

### 3.7.3 Self-organisation, Emergence and Participation

A key feature of complex adaptive systems is their capacity to self-organize and create new structures and behaviours (McMillan, 2008). This capacity enables the system to respond to changing needs and is vital to continued survival. The application of this concept to management practice suggests that rather than a top-down approach linked with control and direction, self-organization should be encouraged in order to meet the organizations vision. (McMillan, 2008, Marion, 1999). Whereas systems are traditionally organised by their form and function, Wheatley (2006) argues a shift in focus towards process structures is necessary to enable self-organising systems to emerge.

‘They (organizations) have eliminated rigidity...in order to support more fluid processes whereby temporary teams are created to deal with specific and ever-changing needs’.

(Wheatley, 2006 p82)

In order for new knowledge and thinking to emerge, which will be of use to the changing contexts the self-organization needs to be around shared beliefs, values or ideas. Stacey (2001) suggests that innovation knowledge occurs at the ‘edge of chaos’. Boisot (1998 p37-9) describes the edge of chaos as the point at which ‘*complexity absorption* which leads to steady flow of tacit knowledge locked in peoples heads’ requires ‘*complexity reduction* producing a flow of explicit knowledge’. Failure to reach this point results in a static state and eventual atrophy.

Self-organization, once there is the freedom for it to occur, is dependant upon participation. As mentioned earlier knowledge creation and learning is a participative process. As individuals participate in co-creating knowledge, greater connectivity is achieved throughout the organisation and greater ownership of the vision. This greater connectivity can take the form of networks or informal team working,

‘It can help those who are already singing the song to sing it clearer, they will take it back to their networks and it will be transmitted and amplified. Knowing what is meaningful to the network is crucial’

(Wheatley, 2006 p153)

The development of the retention strategy by senior management was aligned to systems thinking (Senge, 1990) in that it was institution-wide introducing initiatives both centrally and through faculties to effect change. Within a traditional hierarchical structure, concepts concurrent with complex adaptive systems could be perceived as threatening and loss of control. Stacey (2001) whilst advocating this approach recognises the tension and the need to acknowledge it,

‘the conversational life of an organization is a potentially transformative, knowledge-creating process, when through the diversity of participation it has the dynamics of fluid spontaneity, liveliness and excitement, inevitably accompanied by misunderstanding, anxiety-provoking threats to identity and challenges to official ideology and current power relations’

(Stacey, 2001 p183)

In order to answer the research questions my methodology had to include an approach capable of recognising and identifying different contexts. To achieve this it would be necessary to include a wide range of evidence facilitating a depth study and to avoid a superficial approach based on espoused management models and organisational behaviours.



## 4. Theoretical Framework

The aim of the University's retention strategy was undeniably to improve student retention across the University. However, there was no explicit explanation for the type of interventions chosen or an indication as to why they might make a difference to retention. In addition, there was no reference to any research literature or theoretical models on which the strategy may have been based. The fact that the majority of the interventions were based around providing social and pastoral support implies that Tinto's interactionalist theory had some influence. There was also evidence of the influence of Yorke's (1999) research influencing the return to study project discussed earlier. The only intervention supporting academic integration was the study skills programme (appendix 1). This provided workshops and one-to-one tutorials on academic writing. Hence, it was possible to conclude that each intervention aimed to encourage social or academic integration or both and consequently improve student retention. There was little reference to organisational behaviour in the strategy or action plan with the exception of a statement on resourcing,

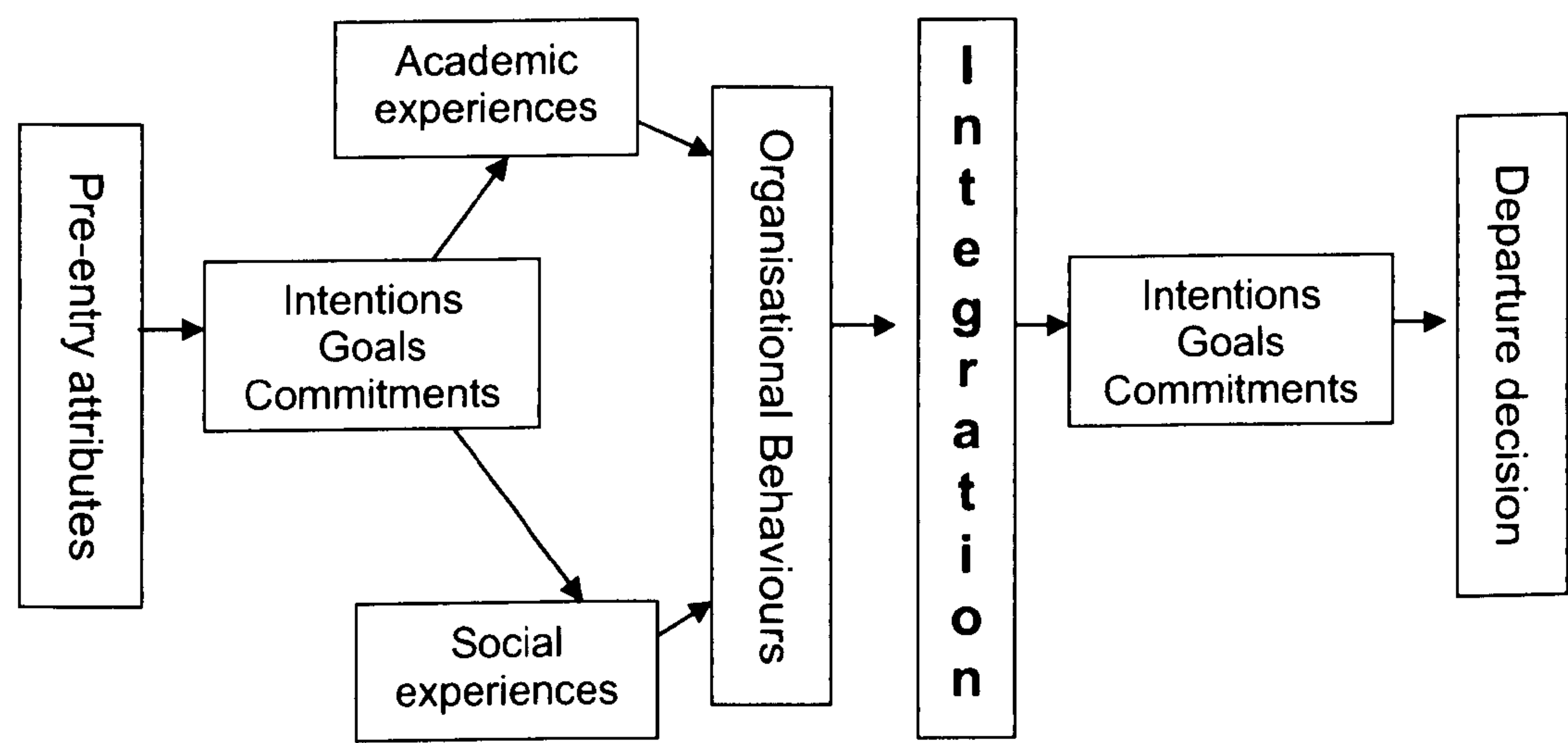
'The university has sometimes found it difficult to manage the flow of resources to key locations to support retention. We need to break any logjams between ongoing local, short-term spending patterns and strategic institutional priorities.'

(University Retention Strategy, 2003)

There was an implication here of organisational bureaucracy, inhibiting the development of retention initiatives. In a similar manner organisational behaviour could influence how evidence was used both at institutional and local

levels to effect change and this needed consideration. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, an adaptation of Tinto's interactionalist theory, incorporating organisational factors was proposed (figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1 Interactionalist Model of Student Departure (based on Tinto, 1975)**



To interpret organisational behaviour, I intended to use the six models of management formal, collegial, political, subjective, ambiguity and cultural, identified by Bush (1995). This provided a framework within which aspects of leadership, management, organisational behaviour and strategic development were discussed and related to my second research question.

The retention strategy comprised a number of smaller projects and initiatives operating at different levels within the University. The purpose of this research was either to discover how these interventions made, or did not make, a difference and how the 'evidence' that they did or did not, was used to change

policy and practice. How it was used may be informally or strategically. The various permutations are summarised below.

**Figure 4.2. How evidence is used and the impact this had on student retention**

Evidence was used <i>and</i> Had impact on retention	Evidence was not used <i>but</i> Had impact on retention
Evidence was used <i>but</i> Had no impact on retention	Evidence was not used <i>and</i> Had no impact on retention

The majority of research studies, particularly from the US were quantitative and based on large-scale surveys. The researchers themselves acknowledged their conclusions are not generalizable usually being institution-specific. On the other hand, critics of systematic review, as the means of generating evidence to inform policy and practice, criticised the lack of attention to context and were sceptical of its use in practice (Hammersley, 2005, Clegg, 2005).

My decision to acknowledge a broader definition of what constitutes evidence and the need to understand the contexts in which activity takes place informed my theoretical perspective. This was aptly summarised by Clegg (2005 p420), in that to understand the outcomes of an educational intervention, we needed to be interested in the ‘structures, powers, generative mechanisms and tendencies’. It was not possible to answer the research questions from an

entirely positivist or interpretivist perspective, the complexity and variety of initiatives as well as the range of contexts and levels at which they operated required a pluralist approach.



## 5. Methodology

My initial intention was to carry out a 'planned' evaluation, (Rogers and Badham, 1992 p102) using success criteria and performance indicators against which to measure outcomes and make value judgements. My further reading on theoretical perspectives and the nature of inquiry, particularly the historical distinctions between evaluation and research, led me to consider this approach too simplistic. The summary of this debate, presented by Cohen *et al* (2000), recognised that there was now considerable overlap between evaluation and research and although conceptual differences exist, in practice there was much blurring of the boundaries.

Evaluation in an educational context has been, and still is to an extent, considered contentious in that it involves collecting data from which to make value judgements about practice, whether it is improvements in management practices or improvements in students' learning. Aspects or sub-sets of evaluation, such as monitoring, audit and review have become increasingly common at all levels of education in the UK over the past fifteen years through the work of external agencies such as QAA, OFSTED and previously FEFC. The extent of this activity means that evaluation and particularly self - evaluation, in some form or other is now embedded as part of institutional practice. Rogers and Badham (1992) suggest there are two main purposes of evaluation namely,

*'Accountability to prove quality and development to improve quality'*

(Rogers and Badham, 1992 p101)

Historically, evaluation in educational research developed from a positivist paradigm, whereby the social world exists externally and elements of it can be measured objectively. Earlier forms of evaluation followed the classic experimental design; comparing the outputs from two identical groups, a control group and an experimental group, where the latter is subjected to some form of treatment. This enabled judgements to be made about the effect of the treatment in a rational and technological manner, a particularly simplistic view of 'cause and effect'. The view that causality cannot be observed or measured is a key notion of experimental evaluation, it is the effect of the treatment that produces the difference in outcomes and to achieve this all other potential causes are eliminated from the experiment. This is a 'successionist' theory of causation as opposed to a 'generative' theory. Within a real world context, this approach has considerable limitations, not least that within complex social environments it is impossible to isolate all possible causes.

The development of a wider focus to evaluation, which involved a phenomenological approach emerged, whereby both intended and unintended consequences are considered. An example of this is 'illuminative' evaluation (Open University E828, 1995 p35) involving ethnographic approaches. Likewise, 'stakeholder', 'participatory' and 'responsive' evaluation attempt to take into consideration the social context within which programmes operate (Clarke, 1999 p16).

Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that developments in social science have attempted to bridge the positivist versus phenomenological debate, yet approaches to evaluation still locate within one paradigm or the other. Realistic

evaluation is an approach, which attempts to transcend this divide and provide a theoretical framework and methodology, which sees the world as real, yet encourages the researcher to test their understanding of their constructs against evidence. It has its origins in 'realism', which as a philosophy of science,

'Sought to position itself as a model of scientific explanation, which avoids the traditional epistemological poles of positivism and relativism'

(Pawson and Tilley 1997, p55)

The understanding of why things happen or change; the mechanics of explanation are inherent to realism. Consequently, experimental evaluation with its successionist theory of causation is inappropriate to a realist approach. Instead, realistic evaluation is based on a generative theory of causation whereby explanatory processes are identified and considered relevant to our understanding of outcomes. From this position, Pawson and Tilley (1997, p58) developed the proposition that 'causal outcomes follow from generative mechanisms acting in contexts' and this forms the basis for their methodology.

This project was framed as a piece of research and although I had considered an evaluative case study approach, I considered it possible to undertake an evaluation as a research project. The research questions outlined are structured in such a way that they lead to a progressive body of knowledge and not only to making judgements.



1. *What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of its reliability and validity?*
2. *How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform future strategic development?*
3. *How does evidence demonstrate an impact on student retention?*

In order to answer the research questions, I considered it necessary to take a realist stance, which acknowledged the complex nature of evidence and the importance of context previously discussed. Pawson and Tilley (1997 p.63) argued that social programmes such as the retention strategy are social systems based on the interplay of individuals and in this case the institution. They consist of macro and micro processes and interactions. Important within this context is the realist notion of 'the stratified nature of social reality' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p64), whereby all human activity and behaviour is enacted within a wider range of social contexts. This realistic approach appeared appropriate in that it permitted exploration of the 'why and why not' under different circumstances to gain greater understanding of the concrete world of experience.

'To understand inconsistency of outcomes we need to understand how an intervention produces effects; in other words, we need to work with different ontological assumptions informed by a depth ontology'

(Clegg, 2005 p421)



A 'depth ontology' referred to the need to look at underlying mechanisms which caused effects or otherwise. This concept was fundamental to the approach to evaluation determined by Pawson and Tilley (1997) as 'realistic evaluation'. This drew on realism as a philosophy and applied it to a methodology, incorporating an explanatory element into evaluation. Pawson and Tilley (1997) argued that 'experimentalists have pursued too single-mindedly the question whether a programme works at the expense of knowing why it works'. I considered this an appropriate perspective, as the purpose of undertaking the research was both to gain a better understanding and to encourage change.

The broad feature of realistic evaluation is based on the identification and understanding of contexts (C) mechanisms (M) and outcomes (O) and the relationships between them. The mechanisms are 'explanatory' mechanisms, which seek to provide understanding of the underlying meanings as to what it is that can effect change in a program. Mechanisms may be social in that they are aspects of human action, behaviours and choices or may be a particular management intervention or process. In this respect, it is possible to identify mechanisms operating at both a macro and micro level. There are three key identifiers of a program mechanism in that it will

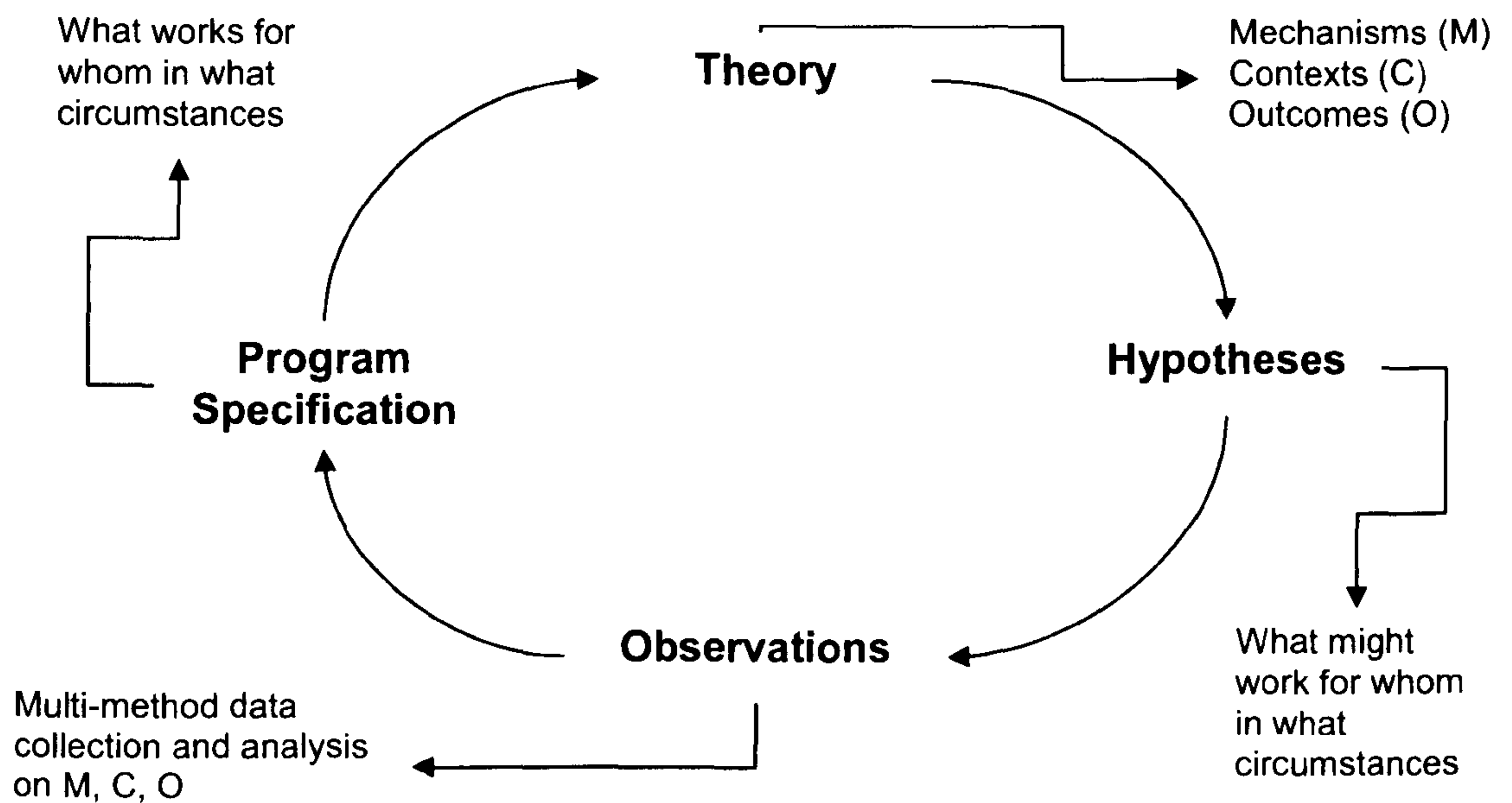
1. 'reflect the embeddedness of the program within the stratified nature of social reality
2. take the form of propositions that will provide an account of how both macro and micro processes constitute the program
3. demonstrate how program outputs follow from the stakeholders' choices (reasoning) and their capacity (resources) to put these into practice'

The identification and understanding of context is crucial and again relates back to realism, in that the effect of causal mechanisms is contingent upon the context within which they operate. The effects of the social, environmental or management contexts within which mechanisms are introduced have the potential to encourage or prohibit change. Program outcomes, successful or otherwise are contingent on the relationship between mechanisms and contexts.

To apply this approach, the University's retention initiatives, were broken down into sub-groups or components. These were evaluated to identify what specific mechanisms produce changes (outcomes) in what contexts. The decision to adapt Tinto's model (figure 4.1) to include organisational behaviours determined how I would define some of contexts in that they would relate to Bolman and Deal (1991) and Bush (1995).

Figure 5.1 indicates the realist evaluation cycle. The starting point in the cycle was the hypothesis tested for each initiative. However, the first phase of the study would be exploratory with subsequent initiatives tested against emerging hypotheses drawn from data analysis.

**Figure 5.1. The realist evaluation cycle (after Pawson and Tilley 1997)**



The *theory* within the cycle is articulated as 'propositions about how mechanisms are fired in contexts to produce outcomes' (Pawson and Tilley 1997 p85). This was interpreted in relation to the retention strategy as to what; within each project or initiative (sub-group), mechanisms were introduced and within what context they might appear to lead to actions (outcomes), which improved retention. As the study progressed these cumulate to build theory.

The *hypothesis* generated was tested for each individual component and informed the data collection methods. In the case of the retention strategy, the components were the retention initiatives. The data collection methods are both determined by, and employed to test the hypothesis and may be quantitative, qualitative or a mixture of both. Interpreting this in relation to my research, the hypothesis tested for each component, was formulated to answer the research questions, particularly *how evidence is utilised to inform future strategic development and how evidence demonstrates an impact on student retention*.



What the evidence actually was, for each component was also discussed in terms of reliability and validity, which related to the first research question.

The third stage of the cycle, *observations*, refers to data collection. The need to adopt an appropriate methodology to answer the research questions was to my mind fundamental. Employing a purely positivist or an interpretivist stance and associated methodology would have rendered the evaluation of a complex institutional strategy almost impossible and produce biased outcomes based on partial data collection. Brannen (1992) reinforced this, maintaining the appropriate method is a key criterion,

‘The combining of different methods within a single piece of research raise the question of movement between paradigms at the levels of epistemology and theory. Whether, or not such movement occurs, the process of combining methods highlights the importance of choosing the appropriate methods for research questions and theory.’

(Brannen, 1992 p32)

Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods could produce a more comprehensive picture of particular phenomena, providing the different data collection methods complemented one another. Bryman (1992) argued that although quantitative and qualitative approaches have their respective distinct epistemologies, they do not need to be tied to them *ad infinitum* and it would be ‘unduly restrictive to do so’ (Bryman, 1992). Within a realistic approach, using

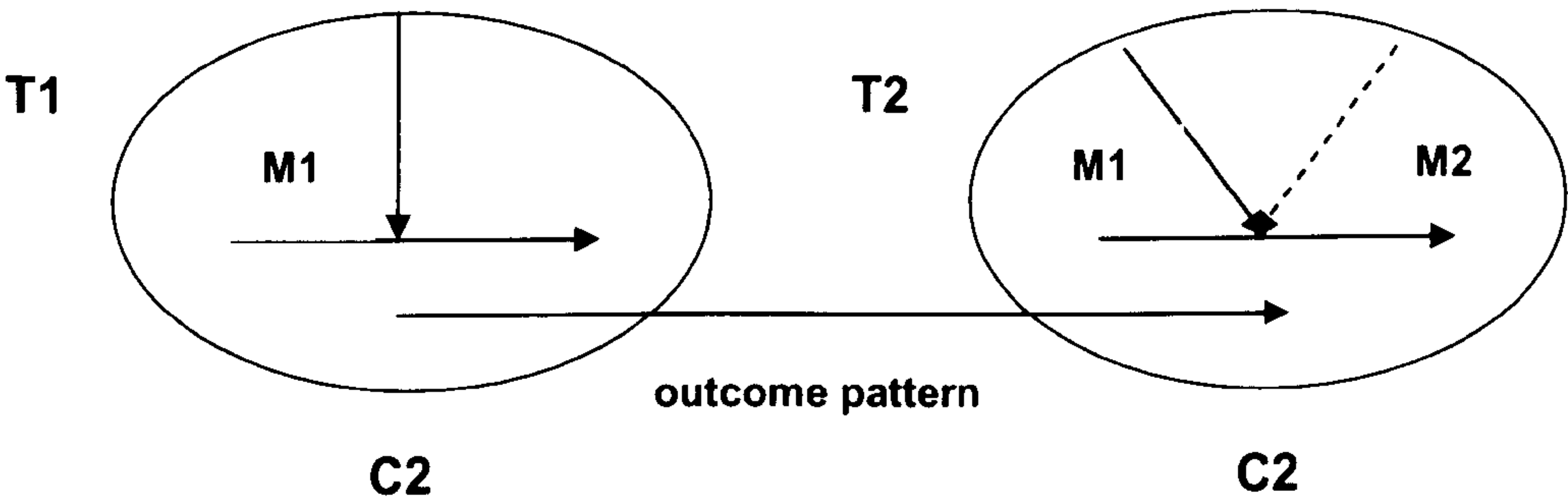


methods determined by the hypotheses would produce a clearer understanding of the particular context - mechanism - outcome (CMO) relationship.

The fourth element of the cycle is *programme specification*. Pawson and Tilley (1997 p86) argued 'specification' is a more relevant goal rather than 'generalization', this was based on the concept that 'what works for whom in what context' is the desirable research outcome. These specifications in turn inform and further develop theory, completing the cycle.

In realistic evaluation, the importance of understanding contextual conditions is fundamental. Pawson and Tilley argued that without the right social and cultural conditions 'change mechanisms' can be ineffective. The contexts within which the various retention initiatives are located are therefore equally important to the success or otherwise of change mechanisms. Where mechanisms were introduced in the wrong environment (context), they are unlikely to cause change. This is illustrated in figure 5.2. where T1 and T2 refer to before and after the intervention respectively, yet the context (C) remains the same. In these circumstances, the same conditions prevailed sustained by the original mechanisms or 'problem mechanisms' (M1). When new mechanisms (M2) were introduced they failed to have any impact as the context (C) was inhospitable and the original 'problem' mechanism (M1) prevailed.

**Figure 5.2. Programme failure due to inappropriate contextualisation**



(Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p76)

**5.1 Realistic Evaluation and the Retention Strategy**

In order to carry out the research it was necessary to disaggregate the strategy into cognate sub-groups of distinct or closely related activity. This enabled me evaluate each component in relation to the three research questions and my theoretical framework. For the purpose of the study, I grouped a sample of the projects and initiatives into four cognate areas or sub-groups. Table 5.1 identifies the groups, the available evidence and key personnel involved.

**Table 5.1. Retention projects and initiatives as sub-groups**

Sub-groups	Evidence	Key personnel
Data management project and Faculty Retention Reports (FRRs)	Faculty generated quantitative data on student withdrawal, progression and achievement  Annually each faculty produced retention reports.	Faculty Data Officers  Director of Students  Heads of Administration  Heads of Departments
Student Peer	Annual project reports from 2003-	Centrally based:

Mentoring Scheme	2006	Project Coordinator Project Clerical Assistant Faculty based Retention Tutors and Student Officers
Student Officers	Annual Student Officer Reports 'Team Award' submission	Faculty based: SOs Heads of Administration Retention Tutors
Retention Tutors	Faculty Retention Tutor Reports	Faculty based: Retention Tutors Attendance Monitors Heads of Faculty Services

For the purpose of this research, the above were selected, as they were indicative of the range of retention activity. The projects were based either centrally (Peer Mentoring) yet engage with faculties or are faculty-based (Retention Reports, SOs and Retention Tutors) engaging with the centre. Each involved a range of personnel both academic and administrative in different roles, participating in different networks and institutional structures. For example, the retention reports were part of the University formal process for quality assurance. Data on retention, progression and achievement were key performance indicators (KPIs) utilised to measure departmental and faculty performance. Peer Mentoring on the other hand was outside the formal process of reporting activity, as were Retention Tutors and Student Officers. I considered this an important feature as evidence from some projects may have a higher status due to how, where and to whom they reported. In selecting and focusing on four sub-groups it was possible to identify for each 'what is to



know', 'who might know' and 'how to ask' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p160), which informed the data collection.

For the initial phase of the study, I focused on the data management project and faculty retention reports (FRRs). It was necessary to look at both in conjunction as the data project, in developing reliable data reports, led to the introduction of the FRRs. The FRRs are substantial documents, containing a considerable amount of statistical data and narrative around retention activities at faculty and departmental level. The Pro Vice Chancellor as assurance requested the reports to indicate appropriate monitoring and interventions were in place to improve retention. In terms of realistic evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), the reports, with the data, are an 'intervention' and sub-group. However, nothing about their introduction intrinsically improved student retention. The purpose of the first phase was to examine these initiatives and the process of introduction to identify the mechanisms and contexts needed for actions to be realised. Likewise, to determine what effects (outcomes) if any were produced, this related to my third research question. In this respect this initial phase of the research was an 'exploratory case study evaluation' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p87) focused on theory formation and development, which would inform further research.

## **5.2 Data Collection**

The data collection methods selected are those I considered most appropriate to answer the research questions. The data from these different methods was used to confirm or corroborate findings, an approach in common with concurrent triangulation (Creswell, 2003 p217), using different methods within a



single study to draw conclusions. I anticipated by using different methods, I should be able to evaluate comprehensively and objectively the purpose and impact of the data management project and FRRs in relation to retention. This was summarised by Cohen *et al.* (2000 p112) in discussing triangulation, as 'the more methods contrast with each other, the greater the researcher's confidence'.

The Faculty Retention Reports conformed to an agreed reporting template (appendix 2). In addition to quantitative data on withdrawal, progression and achievement, there was an analysis identifying key findings, plus reports at faculty and department level on activities to improve poor retention. The reports were to be used internally at faculty and departmental levels, and were required by the student experience committee (SEC) annually. The SEC is one of two University sub-committees to Academic Board. The reporting officer for retention at this committee was the Director of Students, who also had responsibility for the Student Management Information System (MIS). The Deputy Vice Chancellor chaired the SEC.

The FRRs were introduced in autumn 2005 following an 18-month data management project carried out by Data Officers (DOs). The project involved writing a standard reporting tool for retention, which ran both centrally and at faculty level. The project agreed standard data definitions for students in terms of withdrawal, intercalation, progression, non-returnees and achievement. Prior to the project definitions were determined locally at faculty level, consequently data conflicted with that produced centrally.

To evaluate the data management project and FRRs as a sub-group of the retention strategy I collected the following data:

1. Document analysis of Minutes from Data Officers (DOs) Meetings  
(Feb-July 2005)
2. Document analysis of the Faculty Retention Reports from December 2005 (2004-5 cohort)
3. Semi structured interviews with Heads of Department
4. Semi structured interview with the Director of Students

In selecting the above, I was aware that I was including everyone who had been involved in the production and processing of the data management and the FRRs. I could also have gathered data from Retention Tutors, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Deans and the Head of Strategic Development. However, the selection of data collected was based on the realist approach, considering 'what is to know', 'who might know' and 'how to ask' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) in order to prioritise the data available in relation to the research questions.

### **5.2.1 Documents**

The purpose of the document analysis of DOs meeting minutes was to establish the reliability and validity of the statistical data. I had attended several of these meetings myself and was involved as an adviser in the development of the FRR template. The consultation process undertaken in developing the template was considered, as it influenced both status and acceptance of the report template.

A content analysis of the FRRs provided evidence about the context within which the FRR was produced. The context included for what purpose and for

whom the report was written as well as evidence of institutional, social and cultural aspects. Krippendorf (1980) defined content analysis as 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context'. The relationship stressed here between content and context was appropriate and consistent with a realist approach to evaluation.

The framework I used was developed from Holsti (1969) who identified the following six categories:

Subject Matter: *What is it about?*

Direction: *how is it treated and could there be bias?*

Goals: *What goals / intentions are revealed by the actions?*

Methods: *What are the methods to achieve these goals?*

Authority: *In whose name are statements made?*

Location: *where does action take place?*

This was adapted slightly for the FRRs (appendix 3) but still provided a clear method of categorisation with each category exhaustive and mutually distinct. Parity was important if the analysis was to be used to draw comparisons between reports to evaluate process and purpose. The twelve categories used were:

Author (s): *who wrote the report*

Authority: *who signed off the report*

Purpose of Report: *as stated by the author in the document*

Attrition rate: *campus / UG / years*

Target 2004-5: *Target for student attrition if stated*



Subject matter: *level of analysis included in report*

Reasons for high attrition: *level of knowledge and analysis of contextual factors*

Actions taken: *Initiatives and interventions taken to improve retention*

Goals 2005-6: *Intentions and action plans for following year.*

Methods: *Methods to achieve these goals*

Direction: *how the report is it treated, demonstrate any bias?*

Voice: *indication of the audience, who the report was written for.*

### **5.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews**

The original intention was to send out questionnaires to all HODs with questions on how the FRRs were used internally to inform future action and what effect the process had on student retention. The decision to carry out interviews was taken in discussion with my supervisor as a more appropriate data collection method, providing the opportunity for probing particular issues. The response rate to a questionnaire could also be problematic and as Oppenheim (1992) observed the response in interviews is often higher due to the involvement and subsequent motivation of the respondent.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) advocated a particular approach to conducting interviews in a realistic evaluation,

‘The researcher’s theory is the subject matter of the interview and the interviewee is there to confirm or falsify and, above all, to refine that theory’

(Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p155)



At this stage, I had not reframed the research questions into a specific 'theory' around data management and retention reports. To do so would have enabled me to present the interviewees with a theory to corroborate or refute. In discussion with my supervisor, it was agreed, to initially structure the early interviews loosely around the research questions and retain some opportunity for exploratory discussion. Presenting HODs with a 'theory' around FRRs may have been counterproductive for two reasons. Firstly, this was a new and additional procedure HODs were required to engage with, which they may not have viewed positively. This could skew their responses. Secondly, retention was sometimes perceived, as an institutional priority for purely economic reasons, rather than beneficial for students. The opportunity to present questions in a face-to-face situation was more conducive establishing underlying meanings to responses.

Using a semi-structured approach (Wragg, 1994) meant that each interviewee responded to the same questions, allowing some latitude to probe or further explore particular points. I anticipated the interview would be conversational and was prepared to allow the interviewees to engage in more depth with issues they considered important. In order to draw conclusions on the extent to which HODs engaged with the data management and FRR process it was necessary to gain understanding of their attitudes, beliefs and values as well as their knowledge. By adopting this approach, it was still possible to use the outcomes of the interviews to inform emerging 'theory' but more importantly as an 'explanatory device to help identify variables and relationships' (Cohen *et al.* 2000 p268).

A key strategy of the realist interview was the 'teacher-learner function' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) where the interviewer develops questions around key concepts. The interviewing process then focuses on 'explanatory passages, linkages between concepts, checking, repeat questioning' in order to determine what works for whom in what circumstances. The interviewer undertakes the teacher role asking the interviewee to explore the 'theory' and then subsequently becomes the learner in applying responses to re-inform 'theory' or hypothesis. It was my intention to adopt this element of the realist interview as my research progressed and theory could be built from the initial study of data management and FRRs.

The interview schedule (appendix 4) outlined the broad questions and a section for noting non-verbal responses. I recorded the interview enabling me to simultaneously note visual responses and direct the interview appropriately; each interview lasted approximately one hour.

For the pilot, I selected four HODs to interview. The sampling was purposive (Cohen *et al.* 2000 p103) in that I handpicked the HODs based on the following criteria,

1. HODs were based in different faculties, thereby covering all four faculties. This assisted in determining the sample size, an uneven sampling may create bias, and a degree of pragmatism influenced the number of interviews that could be transcribed and analysed.

2. HODs were from two departments which had good retention (>80%) and two identified by the institution as having poor retention (<80%). This may generate interesting comparative data on perceptions and attitudes to institutional processes and approaches to student retention.

The interviewees identified as 1-4 were based in faculties A-D respectively. The interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using codes apportioned to the data. The coding labels used enabled me to identify emergent themes and extract comparative data to evaluate the interviews collectively. The method of analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994), which is both detailed and comprehensive, was used as a guideline. In all cases, HODs were co-operative and open in their discussions, consequently the interviews yielded a rich collection of data (appendix 5).

As reporting officer to the SEC, the Director of Students was able to provide a different perspective on the reporting process. Although responsible for management information systems, the Director of Students was not responsible for addressing retention issues nor has any line management responsibility for Deans or HODs. Consequently, as anticipated their role in the process was more impartial and objective. The data from this interview was used to triangulate HODs views on how evidence is used strategically, and confirm the reliability and validity of the data and FRRs.

### **5.3 Research Role**

My role as Retention Strategy Coordinator inevitably meant I had a professional interest in undertaking the research. It was closely aligned to my responsibilities



and an aspect of my job description. However, the research was not undertaken at the request of senior managers at the University and was self-initiated. In this respect, I regarded my role as that of an 'interested researcher' (The Open University, 1995 p33) with primary loyalty to myself. Notwithstanding, I was aware that the outcomes of the research might inform future practice and the next stage of the retention strategy. That I was not concerned with effecting or implementing change as part of the research was an important consideration as had I been it would possibly influence colleagues' perceptions. A management-led consultancy approach could have produced different responses for two reasons. Firstly, because staff on fixed short-term contracts managed many of the retention initiatives and projects, scrutiny as a management-initiated process may have led to biased responses. Secondly, funding for the strategy was channelled through the ADU and I had considerable influence on deployment. I further consider any dialogue I had with Heads of Departments (HODs) would take on a different dimension if the evaluation were seen as initiated by senior management.

#### **5.4. Ethical Considerations**

Cohen *et al.* (2000 p279) identified three areas of ethical consideration in relation to interviewing namely. 'informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of the interview'. At the point at which I contacted the HODs to ask if they were willing to be interviewed, I explained the nature and purpose of the interview. This gave them the opportunity to express any concerns before agreeing to participate. The same approach was used with subsequent interviews in later phases of the study.



The interviews were for research purposes and not undertaken as part of my role as Retention Strategy Coordinator. In this respect, the responses were not going to be used for any immediate institutional purposes; to an extent, this limits the consequences of the interview and was important in establishing the relationship between the respondents and myself. I gave an assurance of anonymity, where I may use any comments or quotes in my reports. A potentially contentious area was where HODs and other individuals may, or may not express views about the effectiveness of the process. Therefore, the opportunity to view a transcript of the interview and request any comments be omitted was also made.

The focus of the interview was discussed prior to the interview to allow respondents to decline if they so wished. Essentially, the questions asked were about their role in the process of contributing too and acting upon the FRRs (appendix 4). In addition, my proposed research was approved through the University's process for ethical approval of educational research.

## **6. Data Management and Faculty Retention Reports**

### **6.1 Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data was organised according to the three research questions. In each section, findings were referenced to the relevant literature in the literature review and methodology.

**What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity?**

#### **6.1.1 Data Officers and Data Management**

The data management project, started in early 2005, was six-month project to establish agreed data definitions for student withdrawal, intercalation, progression and achievement across the University. The Director of Students, who had responsibility for the management information system (MIS), determined the project. Although the University used one MIS (Banner), faculties had determined their own definitions and categories, resulting in considerable disparity between data generated centrally for HESA returns and that used locally. Addressing the inaccuracy and inconsistency in the data was fundamental to the success of the strategy to improve student retention. Until data was accepted as reliable, it was not going to be possible to address other, possibly more contentious, issues affecting retention. The statistical data was and still is the key performance indicator within the institution and externally.

Data Officers (DOs) with data report writing skills, appointed to each faculty, worked on the project with a representative from the central Banner office. A document analysis of minutes of meetings during the project evidenced the

process undertaken by the team to ensure agreement over definitions and ownership by faculty administrators and heads of departments. Different members of the team, to ensure consistent outcomes rigorously tested the data-reporting tool. Data sets were 'tidied' to categorise students denoted with 'partial' or 'no recommendations' at assessment boards. Similarly, categories for intercalating, non-returning students and non-returnees following intercalation were identified.

The retention reports ran twice a year (November and February) both in faculty and centrally on the same day to ensure consistency. The reports for 2004-5 and 2005-6 can be used comparatively, providing information at faculty, departmental and programme levels.

The Director of Students assured the 'security and reliability of retention data produced in the institution' and stated it should be 'available to whoever requires it on a regular and timely basis'. Data Officers were able to produce data on request for faculty executive teams (FETs) throughout the academic year for monitoring retention.

The data formed part of the Faculty Retention Report produced for Student Experience Committee (SEC) in November. The FRRs were the mechanism by which faculties reported activities to address retention and were part of the quality assurance processes within the institution. The Director of Students, who gave assurance that appropriate monitoring of retention was in place and interventions were introduced, presented the reports at SEC.



**6.1.2 Documentary Analysis**

In the FRRs statistical data was supplemented by a textual analysis and commentary under specified headings (appendix 2). A document analysis of the reports was undertaken to determine the validity and reliability of further ‘evidence’ additional to the quantitative data.

**Table 6.1 Outcomes of Document Analysis: Faculty Retention Reports  
2004-5 (referenced from appendix 3)**

Theme	Faculty A	Faculty B	Faculty C	Faculty D
1. Author	Wide consultation	Mixed consultation	Limited consultation	Wide consultation
2. Authority	Authorised (Dean)	None stated	None stated	None stated
6. Subject Matter	Detailed analysis	Limited analysis	Limited analysis	Detailed analysis
7. Reasons for Attrition	10 causes	None given	2 causes	6 causes
8. Actions taken	8 interventions	3 interventions	3 interventions	3 interventions

Table 6.1 indicated the process undertaken in both faculty A and D included consultation with HODs or Progress Coordinators in each department; this was further evidenced in the analysis of themes 7 and 8. The reports from both faculties indicated a clearer understanding of causes of attrition and cited a higher number of interventions to improve retention. Reports from both faculty A and D presented a detailed analysis (theme 6), with data in percentage terms and actual figures, plus a comprehensive commentary discussing trends in retention, progression and achievement. The analysis was considered limited in reports B and C, as data is presented as percentages and is potentially misrepresentative of students actually retained.



Heads of Administration and DOs produced the reports, in some cases there was an input from Retention Tutors. Table 6.1 indicates the extent to which HODs were involved in the process. However, the only report clearly authorised by the Dean was report A. This was indicative of the range of consultation in the faculty and the manner in which the process was approached.

The analysis of the documentation indicated variations in the validity and reliability of some of the material in the reports. Both reports B and C indicate some or limited consultation in preparing the reports and this is reflected in the level of detail of action and intervention (themes 7 and 8).

### **6.1.3 Interviews with Heads of Departments**

The evidence from the interviews demonstrated HODs had differing perceptions about the validity and reliability of the statistical data contained in the FRRs despite the work undertaken by the data management project team

‘So even with the mechanisms they have in place they are not absolutely robust (the figures)...but everybody’s figures move up so they are not a true record’

(Interview, HOD 2)

In this case, the inference was that figures are manipulated to put the University in a ‘good light’ and improve the position in league tables. This external purpose was deemed acceptable, yet implied the data need not be taken too seriously internally.

There was some confusion over the definitions used and the interpretation of the data. HOD 1 acknowledged that although he may not fully understand the data the DO was invaluable in helping to make sense of it.

‘No explanation on why it is different, at least if there are still difficulties. L (DO) knows what going on and tracks that and if something doesn’t make sense you can go back’

HOD 3 had a more negative interpretation of the reliability of the data,

‘Now to some extent we don’t know whether that is because we are losing them or because the data is wrong, because does *retention* relate to retention on a course or within a department or within the University? That is still a grey area that is the problem. Nobody seems to know exactly what the definition is’.

(Interview, HOD 3)

The only wholly positive response came from HOD 4 who accepted the reliability of the data and the data was used on a regular basis to monitor activity at departmental and course level.

The comprehensive process undertaken in writing and developing the reporting tool indicated the data is consistent and valid. This was triangulated by the detailed data analysis and commentary produced by faculties A and D and comments from the Director of Students. In comparison, perceptions of HODs differed with some more convinced they were receiving a ‘true’ picture than

others, indeed there was an element of scepticism. This was an indication of the cultural context within which the FRRs were discussed and disseminated at departmental levels, which would impact on change mechanisms. (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

**How is evidence used at local and institutional levels to inform future strategic development?**

#### **6.1.4 Institutional Level**

The Director of Students commented that ‘an enormous amount of work had gone into producing the reports’ and was particularly keen that faculties received feedback following the submission of the reports to the SEC. Further comment included,

‘The committee received the reports giving assurance that procedures were in place. However, there was no scrutiny of the content of the reports or discussion, as the SEC did not consider this its role.’

(Interview, Director of Students)

The Director of Students implied, in discussion, he considered this an inappropriate response, unlikely to encourage engagement from faculties in future. Due to the make up of the committee, with faculty representation, this lack of response was inevitably communicated back to FETs. This was evidenced by the response from HOD 3 discussing the reporting process



‘This is not a criticism of our Teaching and Learning Group, or anybody in particular but they will do a report and it will go to the Student Experience Committee, and again I have not been to that one, but from what I can tell, that (SEC) proof reads reports that go to Academic Board and the whole thing seems to be that everybody is assured of the process at every stage and therefore it works’

(Interview, HOD 3)

The indication was of a quality assurance process, which required compliance, but was unlikely to neither engage staff nor inculcate any real change through dialogue or feedback. This apparent lack of engagement was corroborated by the low levels of consultation within faculties in producing the reports evidenced in the document analysis and discussed earlier (table 6.1).

Departmental targets for student retention were set annually by the DVC, the targets were one of several performance indicators for departmental heads. This process appeared to be a ‘top–down’ approach. The data used to inform target setting was that which was included in the FRRs. The evidence from all four interviews with HODs is indicated this was a formal bureaucratic management approach (Bush, 1995 p143-7), with little or no negotiation over retention targets.

‘No, its not collaborative, I actually think what happens is... this (the targets) comes down and the Dean will look at it quite closely, but there is no engagement with the people who have to then solve the problems who are the departments’

(Interview, HOD 2)

The approach illustrated had implications for the effectiveness of any change mechanisms introduced at departmental level, by potentially creating a hostile context. This was key; Knight and Trowler (2000) argued for recognition of the importance of the department as primary locus for change,

‘In a higher education institution the academic department or subunit of it is usually the main activity system for most academic staff’

(Knight and Trowler, 2000 p69)

It was the HOD and staff who would be primarily tasked with improving retention, yet responses from three of four HODs indicated disengagement with the process induced by a lack of consultation.

‘There’s no real sense of negotiation, I don’t think. Like the targets, I mean, when they were put in for us at the start of the year and I put them on the figures, spreadsheets, it was like “where are they from”.

(Interview, HOD 1)

Additionally the targets could seem unrealistic and unachievable. HOD 3 had a retention rate above the national benchmark for the discipline, but was set a target against other departments in the faculty,

'We were less, at 80 odd percent and most of the other parts of the faculty were up toward 90% so they set the targets at 95% or something. Great!'

(Interview, HOD 3)

In each case there was an apparent lack of ownership of targets by HODs, they were neither consulted, nor included in the process. The emphasis on quality assurance and targets was indicative of 'cold' managerial approaches (Bottery, 2000 p65-6) and as such expected compliance rather than commitment. Clearly, the only evidence from the reports used institutionally was the statistical data and this was to monitor and set targets. This sent a clear signal back to faculties. The documentary analysis indicated some faculties (A and D) engaged in a wide range of additional interventions to address attrition, which was not acknowledged by SEC or senior management through feedback.

The management of the FRRs at an institutional level was likely to impact on how HODs responded at departmental level. HODs perceptions were important, as they formulated the departmental social and cultural contexts in which change was intended to take place. The evidence above indicated a cynicism and element of disengagement with process from HODs in faculties A, B and C. HOD 4, faculty D was accepting of the validity of data and the FRR process.



## **How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform strategic development?**

### **6.1.5 Faculty Management and Leadership**

HODs were asked how the reports were used and disseminated within the faculty and department. This enabled me to identify potential mechanisms for change (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Evidence from the interviews related to structural processes and cultural contexts, particularly at departmental level, which differed significantly. Broadly, indicating different attitudes and actions in departments 2 and 4, with both 1 and 3 responding in a similar manner.

Structurally, each faculty was similar, namely a collection of departments with HODs reporting directly to the Dean. The faculty executive teams (FETs) met on average every six weeks. Evidence indicated that the FRRs were discussed at this level in faculties A, B and D. Additionally; faculty D had 'departmental progress coordinators', academic staff, with a retention remit who liaised with course leaders and course teams. In these cases, it was a monitoring process to discuss the 'trend against the targets that have been set' (HOD 4). In faculty C, the FRRs went to the Teaching and Learning Committee, which was supposed to meet termly and produce a summary for HODs. This process was less satisfactory as meetings were sporadic and the HOD was not a committee member.

'Well, I don't know, I think I have only had it once so far (the summary) ... it (the committee) relies on informal processes to

make it work, but I have to say, I'm a bit sceptical about the quality processes we have got in place'

(Interview, HOD 3)

Although in most cases retention was an agenda item, it was still essentially a quality assurance process at faculty level. With a flat university structure, the agenda at FET was extensive and the extent to which there was the opportunity for discussion on retention and academic enhancement was probably limited. This was further evidenced by the documentary analysis, the FRRs were generated at faculty level with varied levels of engagement from HODs (table 6.1). faculty A was unique interviewing all HODs in the production of the report. The role of the HOD as the instigator of quality improvement and enhancement in relation to retention was evident in this faculty.

#### **6.1.6 Departmental Management and Leadership**

At department level, both HODs 1 and 3 used the FRRs and data with course teams in regular department management team meetings. This approach was inclusive, transparent and commensurate with continuous improvement, as indicated,

'We feed it (retention data) into course team meetings and talk about it, to see, in a sense, That the feedback on the ground matches the data and what we can do about that. The data in a general sense is a useful trigger'

(Interview, HOD 3)

This discursive approach was important, as ideas were disseminated and translated at all levels to a wider audience. There was the opportunity for feedback from course level up to department and vice versa, translating an assurance process into one, which could lead to enhancement. Additionally, there was an emphasis on empowerment and ownership at course level, but with the support of the HOD. This had much in common with a collegial approach to management and democratic forms of leadership (Hay/McBer, 1998, Open University E849, p20)

'We know there is an issue, we look at it every time some new data comes out just to see if we can get anything from it (the data) and that has triggered what we have done in terms of new initiatives'

(Interview, HOD 1)

Here activity to address retention was considered a collective endeavour between the course leaders and the HOD. The quote also referred to how the data was a trigger mechanism for action at department level and HODs recognised this.

In faculty D, a similar process was in place, although the progress coordinator rather than the HOD managed this. The progress coordinators worked directly with course teams to monitor student withdrawal. An early warning system was in place to prompt action once retention dropped below a threshold on any course (appendix 3, theme 5). The process was formal with retention an agenda item at department management meetings attended by the HOD, progression coordinator and course leaders. The setting of 'standards' or thresholds for



retention at this level, was indicative of an authoritative style of leadership (Hay/McBer, 1998, Open University E849, p20). The procedure operated in all departments across the faculty, Progress Coordinators, the DO and Retention Tutor met together every six weeks, as a team. This cross faculty network enabled them to look at trends, share and disseminate practice.

The approach taken by HOD 2 was different, this stemmed from their perception of the role of a Head of Department, in managing the boundary between the department and the faculty and/or institution. In this case, the HOD considered it part of their role to deal with and respond to the FRRs and data reports,

‘It’s not just the level of responsibility it is also to do with management style So what I do, I answer all the questions because members of staff don’t have time for a lot of these things as well and I would only go to them if I don’t know the answers myself.’

(Interview, HOD 2)

There were assumptions made by the HOD about staffs’ willingness to engage with the process and the HOD clearly saw discussion about the reports and retention as something that stopped at FET. It was a protective approach aimed at defending staff and the department, as evidenced below

‘I think if what you are trying to do is ease the workload, to try to get staff to feel more positive about going to work each day, rather

than just dump a big wodge of information on their desk and say right you have got to wade your way through this when there isn't necessarily a need to do it'

(Interview, HOD 2)

In the interview this was emphasized by the HOD dropping, the FRR onto the table to demonstrate the quantity of material 'faculty' had produced.

Although viewed by the HOD as protective and supportive, the perceptions of the course leaders may have been quite different. Limiting the dissemination of information was a form of control and potentially disempowering of those who worked 'at the coal face' and were closest to any issues. This approach was not conducive to continual improvement as it inhibited sharing of good practice and reflection within the department and subsequently the faculty.

Evidence from the document analysis (table 6.1) indicated two HODs were consulted in preparation of FRR B. This is not evidenced with specific details under themes 7, *reasons for high attrition* and 8, *actions taken*, which are brief and lack specific detail. This indicated the consultation was either 'tokenistic' or failed to elicit 'buy in' from HODs in faculty B. Further supporting the view there was a lack of engagement with the process by HOD 2.

The FRRs as documents themselves provided evidence about both the context within which they were developed and the purpose as to why they were developed. The analysis included a theme, which gave some indication of

embedded meanings. Theme 11 (appendix 3) referred to the 'voice' which identified of the context within which the report has been developed.

In determining the 'voice' of the FRRs I looked at the amount of actual detail included under each theme (appendix 3). As an example, all faculties had the same data fields, yet faculties B and C presented data in percentages only and not actual figures on progression, achievement and withdrawal. In contrast, faculties A and D presented detailed statistical information, flagging courses with less than 85% retention. Similarly, both faculties B and C presented little detail of actions to address neither attrition nor clear action plans for the future. The 'voice' in FRRs B and C was institutional; here the faculty was presented to the institution in the best light. In each case there was little involvement of HODs, with reports generated by administrative staff at faculty level. I concluded this was, to an extent, a contrived image of activity within the faculty.

In contrast, the reports from faculties A and D were transparent and detailed, presenting positive and negative information in a balanced manner. Arguably, the involvement of HODs, and progress coordinators in producing the reports led to greater ownership at departmental level in faculties A and D and less so in faculties B and C.

<b>To what extent does how the evidence is used demonstrate an impact on student retention?</b>
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In order to answer this question, I asked HODs the following questions,

1. What kind of initiatives are prompted at departmental level by the FRR process



2. Do these actions/initiatives make a difference, how do they and to whom?

The way in which the reports and data were disseminated at departmental level was discussed in relation to the previous question. This was taken into consideration in the analysis of the responses to these questions, to avoid the assumption that dissemination within the department automatically led to action. The findings were also viewed in relation to figure 4.2, which illustrated the various permutations in the relationship between evidence and impact.

HODs 1 and 3 were able to discuss specific initiatives introduced at departmental or course level to address student withdrawal. As discussed earlier both HODs referred to the FRRs and data as a 'trigger mechanism', which prompted actions by themselves in collaboration with course leaders. In identifying what appeared to make a difference there was less clarity, as indicated below

'It sounds like... if it is not a contradiction you need to throw target strategies, but lots of them. Because if we just said, right what we think is that the students are lost when they first come, we need someone to look after them and we just concentrate everything on peer mentoring and get it working absolutely perfectly it would make a certain difference ...but there is a whole swath of students it would make no difference to whatsoever.'

(Interview, HOD 1)

This was acknowledging that different initiatives were appropriate for different groups of students. The peer-mentoring scheme where students provided 1:1 support for other students was located centrally. It was introduced at course level within the department to improve retention. However, the HOD further discussed the importance and relevance of 'team building retention work' for sports students. The way in which the FRRs and data were used in this department not only prompted actions, but encouraged discussion about what type of initiative or intervention was appropriate for whom and in what circumstance. There was less evidence to indicate the extent to which individual initiatives made a difference, but acknowledgement that collectively they seemed too. The HOD attributed this to the wide variety of reasons as to why students withdraw.

'I think the thing that I do believe is... because all the reasons why the students are leaving, they are all multifaceted and they are all very different, in different courses and in different individuals and different lecturers and people. I think you need to throw a blunderbuss approach at it, do everything you can on all fronts'

(Interview, HOD 1)

This echoed recent research on the first year experience in higher education (Yorke and Longden, 2007) which concluded there was no one solution to student retention.

The analysis of the interview with HOD 3 identified a range of initiatives prompted by the FRRs and data management process. The initiatives included

a personal tutor programme, attendance monitoring, personal development planning, year tutors and support from the faculty Retention Tutor. Of these, the HOD was able to single several initiatives as beneficial in improving retention,

‘The attendance monitoring has been very successful; it has had an impact for the benefit of the students. I mean they know we are serious about it. Also I can’t give you any data to prove that this has worked, but one thing that seems to be going really well at the moment, we did all the stuff with the peer support, maths and programming and various areas and that worked well’.

(Interview, HOD 3)

However, the HOD acknowledged the difficulty in proving any one initiative works, referring to an improvement in the retention data as the key indicator. To some extent, there was disillusionment there had been so much effort and this was not reflected by an improvement in retention levels,

‘We put an awful lot of things into it (addressing retention through student support) and students comeback and say it is fantastic, the student support they get is really good, on the other hand it doesn’t necessarily equate to retention figures and that’s the problem’.

(Interview, HOD 3)

This demonstrated the HODs’ perception that they and their department was judged solely by an improvement in retention against the targets, which is



commensurate with a performance management approach and quality assurance. The enhancement to the students' experience alluded to, in the above quote is not recognized. This triangulates with evidence discussed earlier, identifying retention data as the key 'evidence' within the University.

In faculty D, the process was different involving the progression coordinators as previously discussed. Here there was a clear procedure involving course leaders to highlight courses 'at risk' once retention drops below defined levels across the faculty. The process was effective in highlighting areas and prompting action. However, the interview with HOD 4 indicated that this is less of a role for the HODs in this faculty,

'I don't really get involved, this is dealt with by the progress coordinator who liaises with course leaders...really I monitor retention at our management meetings and we discuss any areas where there seem to be persistent problems.'

(Interview, HOD 4)

The HOD was also vague about any initiatives introduced to address retention and suggested I meet with the progress coordinator. In addition to a discussion with the progress coordinator, I attended two coordinator meetings as an observer. Although there was a rigorous monitoring process, there was less clarity over who was responsible for introducing interventions to address retention. The progress coordinator role was one of monitoring withdrawals to alert course leaders. They had no authority over course leaders to introduce

interventions and were not part of faculty management, consequently, who initiated actions or what those actions were is unclear.

My notes from meeting observations indicated that the focus of the discussion was on 'reasons for student withdrawal' rather than effective practices to improve retention. The evidence from the analysis of the FRRs for Faculty D, where theme 7 '*reasons for high attrition*' was detailed, yet plans for future action, under theme 9 '*goals*' was scant, supports this (appendix 3). The process at departmental level, appeared to imitate that at institutional and faculty levels. The focus was on monitoring attrition against targets and auditing for student satisfaction (theme 8, '*actions taken*'). There was little evidence of interpretation into actions or enhancement activities to improve retention, nor how the evidence from the FRRs and data management affected retention.

The analysis of the interview with HOD 2 in relation to the two questions provided evidence about the role of the head of department as 'gatekeeper'. The HOD was dismissive of the FRR and data management process and emphatic that it had no impact within the department in improving practice or prompting initiatives,

'No, but we had already put things in place anyway. Because of the process we have put in place as a department, it (FRR and data management) doesn't really prompt actions for your department, it wouldn't actually initiate anything.'

(Interview, HOD 2)

There was acknowledgement that procedures to address retention were in place, but these were a departmental matter and not for wider discussion or dissemination, even within faculty as indicated,

‘You would do them as good practice anyway, they are things you do continually, you don’t necessarily put them into your report (to faculty).’

(Interview, HOD 2)

That the HOD perceived retention as a departmental matter and contributed little at faculty level, is reflected by the lack of detail in the FRR, particularly under themes 7, 8 and 9 which referred ‘*reasons for high attrition, actions taken and actions planned*’. This corroborated evidence from the documentary analysis discussed earlier, which indicated FRR 2 was produced at faculty level and did not fully reflect practice within departments (table 6.1).

Although dismissive of institutional and faculty processes HOD 2 did identify the key ‘triggers’ which prompted action within the department, namely the students themselves. This was referred to as a ‘bottom up’ approach and relied on the HODs close involvement with what was happening ‘on the ground’

‘The actions you have got come internally, from the ‘bottom up’ in a way. Yes, from students and from staff... Absolutely yes, if you are close to it you know there is a problem because the students would be the first to tell you.’

(Interview, HOD 2)



However, when prompted HOD 2 struggled to identify any specific initiatives introduced or what worked to improve retention. It was a reactive approach dependant either upon students raising issues, individually or at course committee meetings.

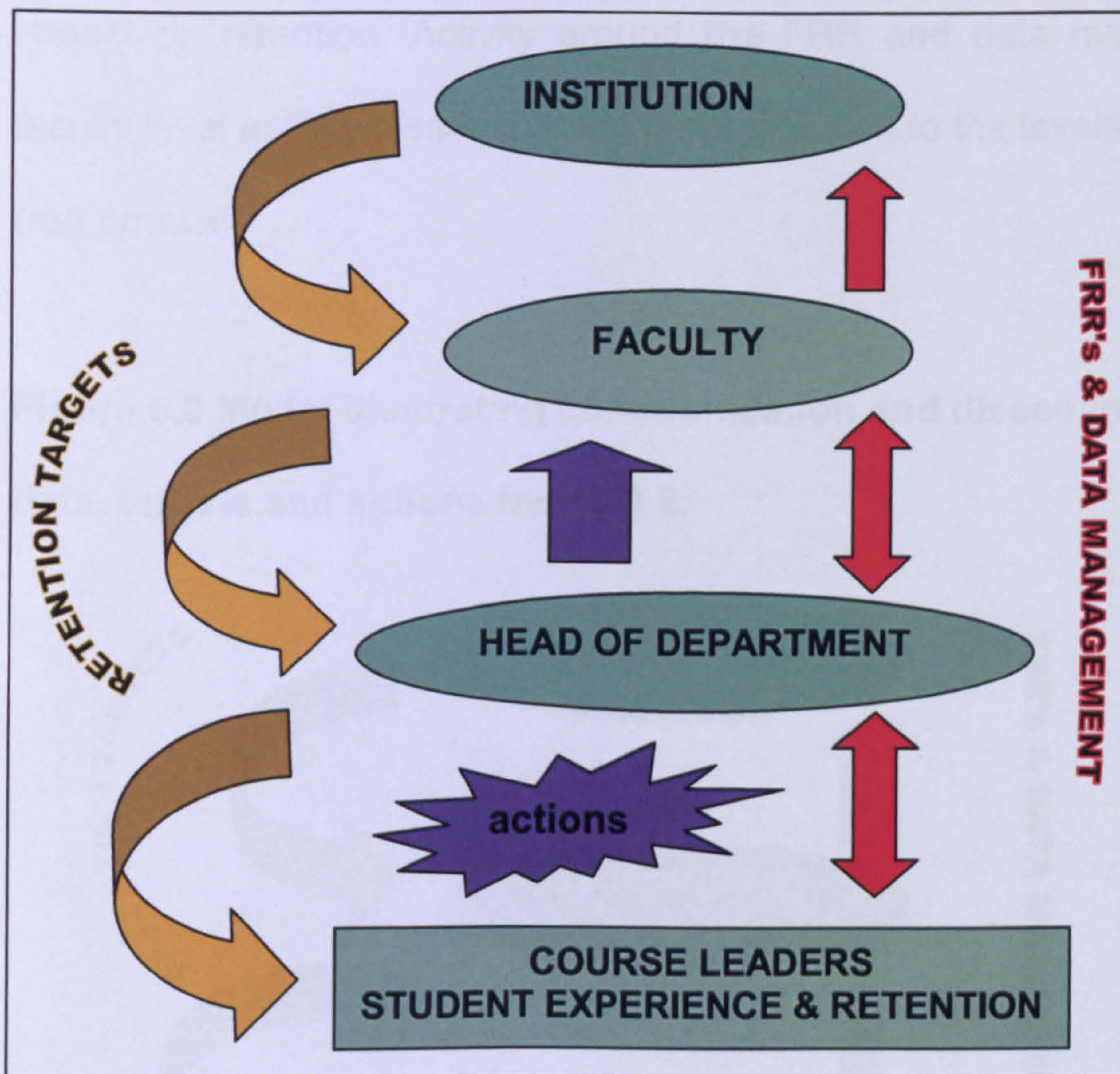
## **6.2 CMO Summary**

The initial phase of my research generated preliminary evidence in relation to each of the three research questions. This was part of the overall study to evaluate a retention strategy, which operated at all levels within the university. As such, the conclusions drawn here were precursory. My intention was to use these to start to build realistic theory, to make sense of how actions taken in different contexts (C) prompt mechanisms (M) which produce outcomes (O) (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) and to test and refine this in the subsequent phases of my research.

From the data analysis, I developed three separate models that illustrated different patterns of communication and dissemination of FRRs, data and targets at different levels within the university namely, institutional, faculty, head of department and course leader. The models summarised the evidence gathered in this initial study. Figure 6.1, is the model representative of HODs 1 and 3 in faculties A and C,



**Figure 6.1 Model illustrating communication and dissemination of FRRs data, targets and actions by HODs 1 and 3.**

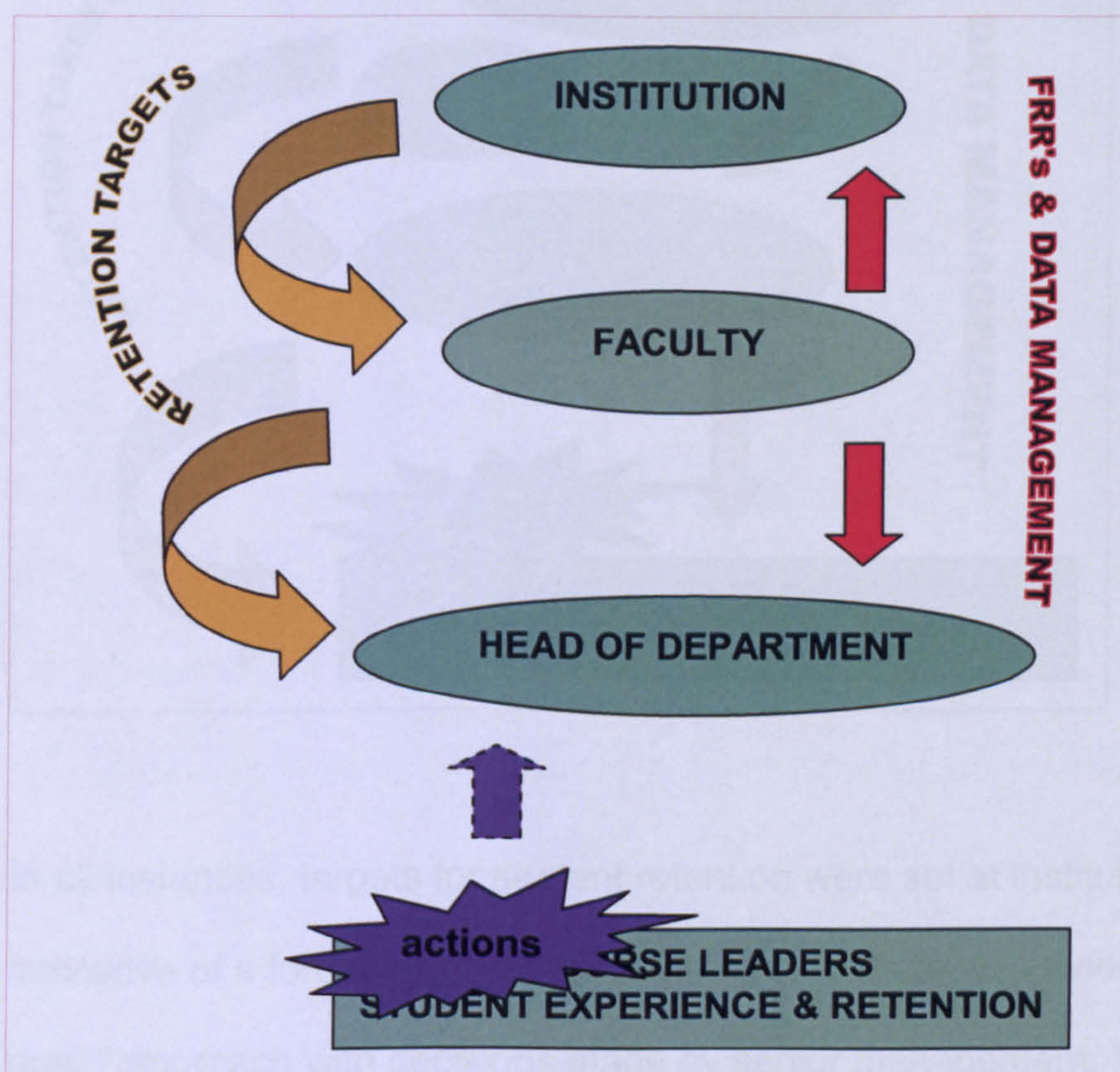


In this model, retention targets (yellow arrows) were disseminated at all levels, down to course leaders. This was a 'top-down' activity, with no negotiation. The data analysis indicated that actions to address retention took place at course and departmental level, through discussion between course leaders and HODs. These activities were fed back up to faculty level and evidenced in the FRRs (blue arrows). The FRRs and data management were disseminated and communicated at all levels (red arrows). Although this was a two-way process between course leaders, HOD and faculty, it was 'bottom-up' only between faculty and institutional levels.



The model representative of HOD 2 and faculty B differs in that much of the communication flow stopped at the level of HOD. The analysis of the FRR and interview provided neither concrete evidence of actions taking place, nor any impact on retention. Activity around the FRR and data management was a faculty level activity disseminated in one direction to the levels above and below (red arrows).

**Figure 6.2 Model illustrating communication and dissemination of FRRs data, targets and actions by HOD 2.**

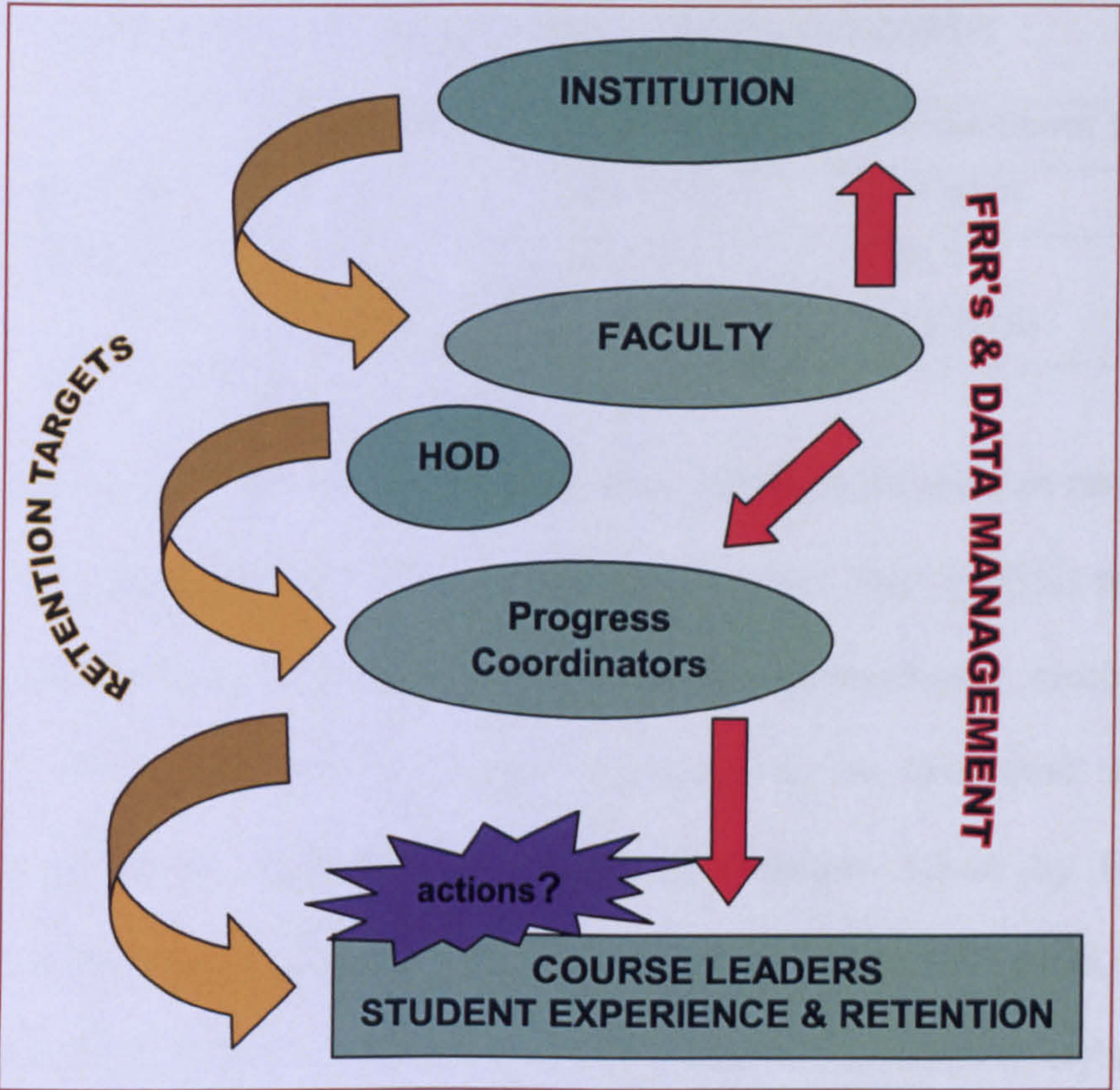


The final model represents HOD 4 and faculty D. Here the structure was different as discussed earlier. There was a 'top-down' approach, which bypasses the HOD. As a result, there was little evidence to indicate activity to



address retention, beyond identifying courses at risk. Neither the document analysis nor interview generated evidence of concrete actions.

**Figure 6.3 Model illustrating communication and dissemination of FRRs data, targets and actions by HOD 4.**



In all instances, targets for student retention were set at institutional level, indicative of a formal organizational structure. There was evidence of a ‘top-down’ approach with decisions made by senior management. The introduction of the FRRs, and support for this process from all other levels within the organization was assumed, to the extent that the SEC did not consider it necessary to discuss the reports nor provide feedback. (Bolman and Deal, 1991, Bush, 1995,). This approach was extended to all levels in faculty D and department 4 delegated via progress coordinators. Berger (2002) found



bureaucratic organizational behaviour had an inconclusive effect on student retention (table 3.1). To some extent, this was reflected by the retention data for department 4, which had remained relatively static for the past two years (table 6.2).

**Table 6.2 Student retention data 2004-5 and 2005-6**

	Department 1	Department 2	Department 3	Department 4
<b>2004 - 5</b>	79.0 %	85.93 %	77.94 %	83.9 %
<b>2005 - 6</b>	81.2% (+2.2%)	84.3% (-1.63%)	80.1% (+2.16%)	83.6 % (-0.3%)

The improvements in retention rates, albeit slight were in departments 1 and 3, both selected for this study because of their ‘low’ (<80%) retention rates. The data analysis indicated that different organizational structures operated at departmental level in these departments, as illustrated in figure 6.1. The participative approach to improving retention taken by HODs and course leaders was indicative of a collegial organizational model, this was similarly reflected in the communicative and discursive leadership style of the HOD. Here the style of leadership appeared to have created a sub-culture conducive to improvement through involving and empowering course leaders. Although preliminary, these findings reflected those of Berger (2002) on the effects of collegial organisational behaviour (table 3.1) and were worthy of further investigation.

Department 2 had one of the highest student retention rates in the institution. This, to my mind, partly explained the HODs reaction to the introduction of the FRR and data management processes, as unnecessary. As such, the HOD did

not engage with the process, by neither contributing to the FRR nor informing and involving staff in the process. Here the HOD created a sub-unit that required protection and saw their own role as managing the boundary between the department and the institution/faculty. To an extent, this was indicative of a political style where the sub-unit or department is in conflict with the institution. However, there is evidence of a degree of control, through the lack of communication with, and involvement of course leaders. As such, the interpretation of the processes introduced by the institution was the HODs individual perception, indicative of a subjective structure and leadership style (Bush, 1995).

From the above summary, it was possible to revisit figure 4.2 and locate each department within the original diagram,

**Figure 6.4 How evidence is used and the impact this has on student retention**

<b>Departments 1 and 3</b> Evidence is used <i>and</i> Has impact on retention	Evidence is not used <i>but</i> Has impact on retention
<b>Department 4</b> Evidence is used <i>but</i> Has no impact on retention	<b>Department 2</b> Evidence is not used <i>and</i> Has no impact on retention

My decision to consider models of management and organisational behaviour was valid. The summary indicated the differing contexts, which was key in understanding how mechanisms were ‘fired’ to produce outcomes and building



realistic theory. That the structures and leadership approaches in a sample of four departments differed significantly, reinforces the importance of considering *context* in undertaking the research into EBP (Clegg, 2005, Bell *et al.* 2003, Hammersley, 2005).

The inclusion of *organisational behaviour* in Tinto's interactionalist model of student departure (figure 4.1) was justifiable in that there are early indications of relationships between student retention and organisational behaviour. This was by no means conclusive at this stage but indicated an emergent hypothesis worthy of exploration in the next stage of the study.

At this stage, although findings were preliminary, I have considered them within a realist framework to determine initial CMO formulations. (table 6.3).

**Table 6.3 A realistic summary of the introduction of data management and FRRs on student retention.**

Context	+	New Mechanism	=	Outcome
Formal management model and bureaucratic behaviours at institutional level. Little involvement of faculties / departments e.g. Lack of negotiation over retention targets and lack of feedback on FRRs Evidence of political behaviours at local	+	Increased <b>awareness</b> of retention through target setting and valid data definitions.	=	Inclusion in quality processes at faculty level. Increased monitoring at course level in most cases, potentially prompting actions.
	+	<b>Engagement</b> from HODs with FRR / data processes is mixed. ( <i>Potential 'blocking' mechanism</i> ).	=	Possible limitation of further activity and retention interventions.

levels				
Collegial organisational behaviours at sub – unit level initiated by HOD. Dissemination of FRR and data to all levels. (depts. 1&3)	+	Communication and transparency	=	Increased involvement and participation of course leaders
	+	Increased <b><i>involvement</i></b> and <b><i>participation</i></b> of course leaders	=	Ownership by course leaders leads to range of interventions to address retention. Some improvement in retention rates
Subjective management model and political organisational behaviours at sub-unit level. Lack of dissemination to course leaders	+	Information <b><i>controlled</i></b> and decisions made at HOD level. ( <i>Potential ‘blocking’ mechanism</i> ).	=	Lack of awareness and involvement at course level, no dissemination of good practice.
	+	Lack of <b><i>awareness</i></b> and <b><i>involvement</i></b> at course level	=	Actions only initiated in reaction to student issues Retention unlikely to improve further as not considered an issue.

From the summary (table 6.3), it was possible to identify approaches and behaviours, which appeared to have positive or negative effects on actions. Although these were not conclusive at this stage, I considered the findings encouraging in providing a basis on which to build as further initiatives were evaluated. The mechanisms included concepts of *awareness, involvement, communication, participation, transparency, control and engagement*

The challenge for the next stage of the study was to apply the same methodology to the other sub-groups of the retention strategy (table 5.1). The

projects and initiatives within the groups were not all faculty-based activities. Some were located centrally, relying on cases of informal cross-institutional networks to promote and develop activities and support student retention. The data or 'evidence' produced by these initiatives does not directly demonstrate 'numbers of students retained'. Consequently, I anticipated that groups within the institution might view this 'evidence' differently.



## 7. Peer Mentoring Scheme

The Peer Mentoring Scheme was established in 2003 as a University wide retention initiative. It developed out of activities designed to support widening participation by offering continued support for students once they joined the University. Under the scheme, students act as mentors to other students. The nature of the mentoring is around personal development and motivation rather than academic support. The mentors are given training, provided by both the coordinator and other experienced mentors. In addition, the scheme offers a series of social and fundraising activities to involve mentors and mentees. The entire scheme is voluntary and organised by the project coordinator and a clerical assistant, both full-time.

The scheme is located centrally under the management of Student Services. It is physically located in the Student Information Centre, where there is a high volume of student traffic, which makes it both visible and accessible. Peer mentoring has been energetically promoted through induction week activities and the work of Student Officers, Retention Tutors and Course Representatives. The annual reports produced by the coordinator indicate the growth in activity during the four-year period, 2003-7 (table 7.1).

**Table 7.1 Peer Mentoring Scheme Growth 2003-7**

Year	Mentors	Mentees
2003-4	58	54
2004-5	200	191
2005-6	496	1284
2006-7	530	2270

The Peer Mentoring Scheme Coordinator produced annual reports for the University from 2003 to 2007. The reports were submitted to the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic), Director of Students and myself as Strategy Coordinator. The reports were comprehensive and increasingly 'evidence-based' as the project evolved. In addition to quantitative data on the numbers of mentors and mentees engaged with the scheme, the coordinator carried out annual surveys, by questionnaire and focus groups, of both mentors and mentees to obtain qualitative data. The supporting narrative linked project outcomes to the university strategic plan, as well as outlining activities and plans for further development.

The Director of Students was the reporting officer for retention at each Student Experience Committee (SEC). Within the formal committee structure, SEC sat below the Academic Committee. The Director's remit was to give assurance that appropriate monitoring was in place, present high-level retention data and briefly report, verbally, on retention interventions. Due to the limited time available, the information presented on the mentoring scheme consisted of the numbers of mentors and mentees engaged. This committee did not discuss initiatives in terms of their effectiveness, efficiency or future development. The primary focus was quality assurance as under the University 'scheme of delegation' responsibility for day-to-day management and decision-making lay with the Director of Students.

## **7.1 Data Collection**

In deciding what data to collect to evaluate the mentoring scheme as a retention strategy initiative I had considered the realist approach and attempted to identify

‘what’s to know?’ ‘who might know?’ and ‘how to ask?’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p160). The scheme was well established, presenting the opportunity of collecting vast amounts of data, both qualitative and quantitative. In organising my thinking, I considered the following derived from a realist approach:

1. Identifying the main ‘practitioners’ and ‘subjects’ of the scheme ( Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p160)
2. What I need to know to further develop my emerging theory around CMO configurations from the earlier study.

The main practitioner was the Peer Mentoring Coordinator, who established the scheme initially and had been the champion within the university. The Coordinator had developed and adapted the scheme and knew in detail its successes and failures. In addition, as champion they had been proactive in developing the scheme across the university and eliciting support from various stakeholders and agencies. For this reason, it was important to interview the Coordinator and give some thought to the style of interview, it would provide useful data of an exploratory nature, but also contribute to my understanding of CMO relationships.

The mentors themselves also acted as practitioners in that they were responsible for translating the theory behind mentoring into practice. Instead of interviewing mentors directly, at this stage, I had included a category ‘mentors views’ in the document analysis. These were extracted from mentor responses to questionnaires distributed as part of the scheme annual evaluation process. In addition, they were also subjects; their response to their involvement in the



scheme may identify mechanisms, which were particularly relevant to determining the impact on student retention and engagement.

‘Programme mechanisms provide the reason and resources which encourage participants to change, and as the persons on the receiving end of these processes, subjects are invariably in a good position to know whether they have been so encouraged’

(Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p160)

The main subjects were the student mentees. Their views were elicited on an annual basis through questionnaires and focus groups and are included in the reports. I had decided to use this information as data, rather than repeat the process by directly interviewing the students themselves. Given the number of students engaged in the scheme, it would have been difficult to identify a representative group to interview. In my opinion, the information in the annual reports would have greater validity. To develop my theory I needed to establish the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes that were operating in relation to the Peer Mentoring Scheme. Once identified these could be considered in relation to the CMO configurations of my earlier study.

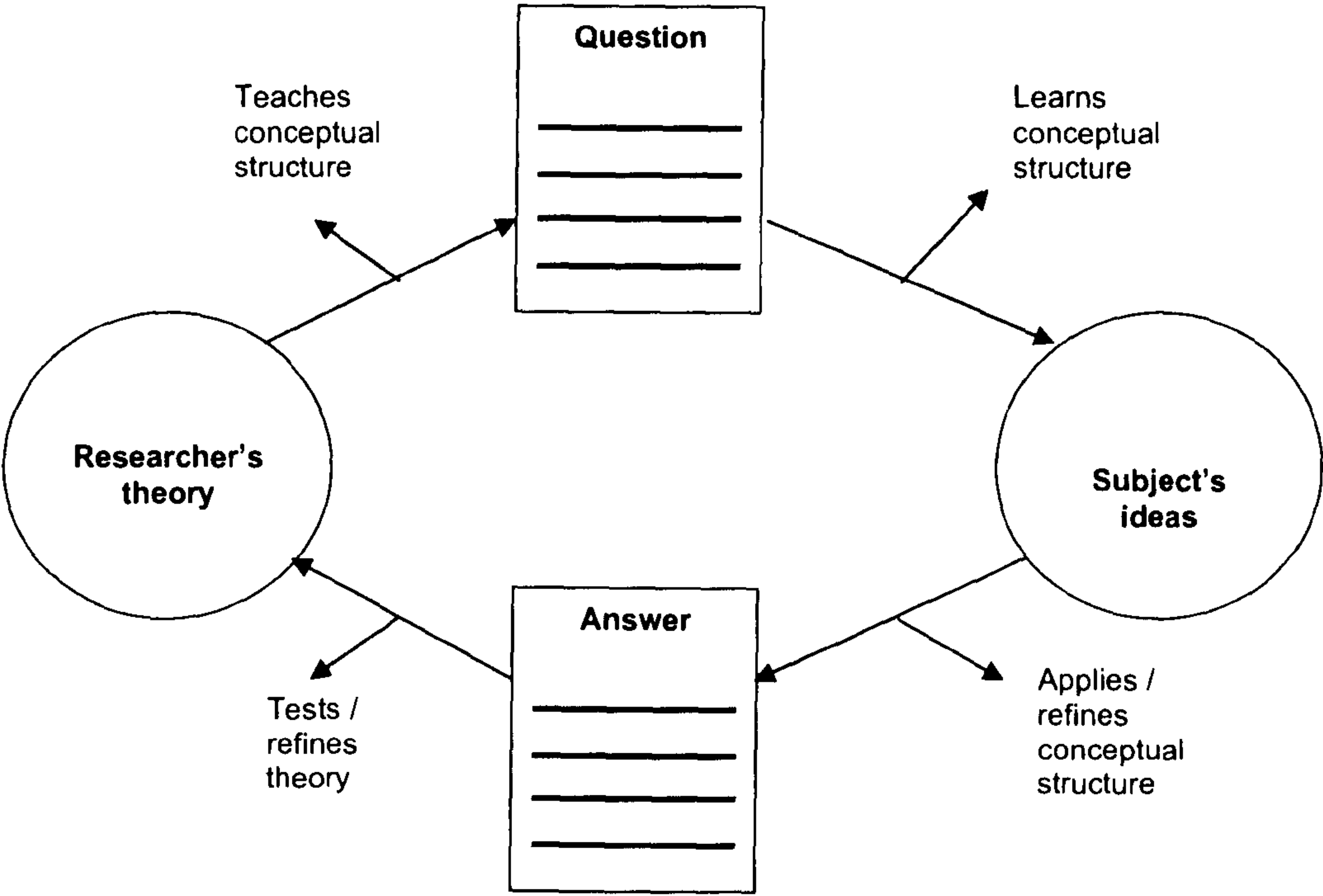
### **7.1.1 The Realist Interview**

This section further expands on chapter 5 in discussing approaches to interviewing. It is included at this stage rather than earlier as it had a relevance to this phase of the research. As discussed in chapter 5, I had decided to take an exploratory approach to the interviews with HODs to identify potential CMO

configurations. As explained below the realist interview is more appropriate for subsequent phases.

Pawson and Tilley (1997 p164) argue that 'the true test of data is whether they capture correctly those aspects of the subjects' understanding which are relevant to the researcher's theory'. Once I had established possible CMO configurations from the first phase of the research it was important the emerging theory was incorporated into any subsequent interviews in order to refine and test these findings. At this stage my thoughts on theory were still emergent. The initial research had identified six possible CMO configurations. The differing contexts in which these mechanisms were employed produced a range of outcomes. Pawson and Tilley (1997 p165) argue case for the 'realist(ic) interview', which highlights two aspects of data collection, which they term the 'teacher-learner function' and 'the conceptual refinement process'.

**Figure 7.1 Basic Structure of the Realist Interview**



(Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p165)

The teacher- learner function is a means by which, through the interview, the researcher tests concepts that are an established part of the theory. The purpose is to collect information to test the theory. Although my research was not sufficiently conclusive to have arrived at an established theory, I could use future interviews to explore and test some of the concepts already identified. This could be a means of triangulation when building theory around the mechanisms drawn from earlier work and identifying new CMO configurations.

‘On the conceptual refinement strategy, respondents deliver their thoughts on their own thinking in the context of and perhaps as a correction to, the researchers own theory.’

(Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p168)



In order to achieve this it was important that, I explained the context within which I was asking questions and developed a mutual understanding about the process. Through this approach the respondent was able to reflect on their understanding of experiences and the reasons for the success or otherwise of various initiatives. The interviews were also exploratory in this respect, which enabled me to identify further new contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. The interview was transcribed and analysed under different themes which relate to the research questions, this is summarised in table 7.2

**Table 7.2 Relationship between research questions and interview analysis**

Research Question	Interview Analysis Themes
What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity	Support from management Perceptions and Recognition Measurable
How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform future strategic planning	Networks Support from management Management expectations
To what extent does the evidence demonstrate an impact on the student experience and/or retention	Recognition Champions (others and self) Skills

**7.1.2 Documentary Analysis**

The content analysis of the reports was adapted from a framework by Holsti (1969) used in the initial study. The content was analysed and collated under eight themes, which were derived from my research questions around the nature of evidence; its reliability and validity and how it is utilised within the institution to inform future strategic development (table 7.3).

**Table 7.3 Relationship between research questions and document analysis themes**

Research Question	Document Analysis Themes (appendix 6)
What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity	Validity and Reliability
How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform future strategic planning	Networks internal Status Management Engagement
To what extent does the evidence demonstrate an impact on the student experience and/or retention	Type of evidence Mentee Issues Impact on retention Mentors' views

The CMO configurations, especially the mechanisms, developed in the initial study had also informed the themes, in particular the inclusion of *management engagement* and *internal networks*. In keeping these discreet, I was able to triangulate findings from the different initiatives, as my research progressed. I envisaged this contributing to the formation of further theory.

In the analysis of the documentation, I placed the data according to its relevance to the theme. However, some of the data could be placed elsewhere or under two themes. For example, much of the data categorised under *Type of Evidence* is quantitative, and was also evidence of the *validity and reliability* of material presented in the report (appendix 6). This was considered in drawing conclusions from the data.

## 7.2 Data Analysis

**What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity**

To assess the reliability and validity of the evidence used in the mentoring scheme; I focussed on the methodology used to collect the qualitative feedback and quantitative data used in the report. In the 2004-5 report the author stated,

‘The mentoring scheme established an appropriate evaluation methodology during the initial pilot phase. This methodology has involved utilising student volunteers to carry out questionnaires, focus group and individual interviews to provide a thorough and fair evaluation of progress’

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

The evaluation questionnaires were developed from materials produced as part of the PAL (peer assisted learning) FDTL project at Bournemouth University (Annual report 2005-6). The response rate from mentors, where stated, was 28% and from mentees between 36-47%. The response rates were not included in all reports, which was unfortunate. In the earlier stages of the scheme, student volunteers carried out the questionnaires; by 2006-7, this became an online survey, which still achieved a 36% response rate (Annual report 2006-7, appendix 6). This compared favourably with the annual online institutional student satisfaction survey, to all first and second year students. This survey received a response rate of around 10% and frequently cited as evidence when used to inform management decisions, at a senior level.



The mentoring scheme questionnaires produced considerable data not only about the effectiveness of mentoring as an activity, but also regarding the impact of the scheme on the student experience in a wider context i.e. PDP (personal development planning) , time management. These are discussed in detail in relation to the third research question below.

There was further evidence in the reports relating to institutional networking and collaborative activity which contributed to the success or otherwise of the scheme. Although less tangible, my study suggested that this had an impact on the development of the scheme and its impact at local levels.

<b>How is evidence used at local and institutional levels to inform strategic planning?</b>
---

At an institutional level, the annual reports were submitted to the PVC Academic and Director of Students as line manager for the scheme. The Head of the Academic Development Unit and I received a copy as the unit was responsible for funding the initiative and overall strategy coordination. As outlined earlier, the Director of Students formally presented the quantitative data to the Student Experience Committee, three times a year as part of an institution - wide retention report. Other evidence contained in the reports beyond the data indicating numbers of students engaged with scheme was not reported through formal processes at an institutional level. This indicated the status given to quantitative data at an 'institution' level and implied that the number of students engaged in the project was the key indicator of success or otherwise.

As Retention Strategy Coordinator, I convened a Retention Forum, which met three times a year. The purpose of the forum in bringing together individuals from across the University, who were involved in retention initiatives, was to disseminate information and share good practice. The forum also included senior administrators from each of the faculty offices and representatives from key central services. The meetings were semi-formal in that they were conducted to an agenda, with notes taken of the discussions and presentations. The meetings regularly attracted about 25-30 individuals. Within the University structure, the Forum had no recognised status and did not report to any formal committees. The notes of the meetings were copied to participants and the Head of the Academic Development Unit.

The analysis of data from mentoring scheme reports indicated that networks played a key part in developing retention initiatives, by bringing together individuals who could support the scheme. The forum provided a focus and some level of coordination for this activity.

‘Key links have been established with other support services within the University’

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

The reports from 2003-4 to 2006-7 each cited examples of internal institutional collaboration and the importance of these networks to the success of the scheme. In total fourteen examples were identified in the reports over this period. (appendix 6). These related to a three main activities. Firstly, raising awareness amongst staff,

‘Further dissemination (of scheme) to academic colleagues enabled by Retention Tutors in faculties’

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

The referral of mentees,

‘Whilst good referral systems have been developed with senior tutors these are more successful in faculties, where there is focussed support for the project. Similarly, recruitment of mentors is better where student officers are full time positions’

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

And finally, the recruitment of mentors,

‘Key and effective links have been developed with Student Officers enabling targeted recruitment (of mentors)

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

There was evidence from the document analysis that certain roles were important to the development and success of the scheme, particularly Retention Tutors, Student Officers and Personal Tutors. The interview with the project coordinator further supported the notion that networking was a key activity in developing the scheme

‘We pushed it forward, I networked as far as I possibly could do’

(Interview, Mentoring Scheme Coordinator)



The extent to which this relied upon personal contacts throughout the university and the students themselves was demonstrated in the following response from the coordinator when asked to describe how the scheme developed in its early stages,

‘I felt that the students supported it. We worked very closely with the Student’s Union at the time. We got course representatives through their advice shop that also referred students to us. Then Project C came forward and then SOs came into place. I worked with them, and they placed students to work with the mentors. The Students Union then had a training and development co-ordinator who became a good friend. She also provided the mentor training’

(Interview, Mentoring Scheme Coordinator)

This quote was indicative of the organic manner in which the project developed, almost by ‘word of mouth’ in the initial stages. The networking was informal and unstructured. It relied on individuals making links across the institution and outside formal management and academic structures. The nature of the activity demonstrated a high level of collaboration between individuals, located both centrally and within faculties, with a remit for student support and retention.

In analysing the mentoring reports, I identified a number of recommendations, which could be grouped together as a theme. These referred to the ‘status’ of the project within the institution. There was evidence that the project could have

achieved greater success if there had been both greater awareness and support from senior management and academic staff.

‘The programme team needs to further good work achieved by marketing the scheme to staff at all levels. Despite persistent networking, many colleagues and students remain unaware of the value of the programme. The Coordinator would welcome senior management acknowledgement and any recommendations of opportunities to present findings to colleagues.’

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

The implication here was that there was little acknowledgement from management of the success of the scheme. There were some developments, at this stage, in that the scheme was subsequently promoted at each faculty Dean’s address to incoming students at the start of the academic year (Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6). There was also evidence that some HODs and course leaders piloted mentoring at course level to address retention issues and helped identify mentees. (interview, HOD 1). This initiative related to students in their second and third years mentoring students in year one. The impetus for this initiative derived from discussions between respective HODs with poor retention, as a possible means of supporting students and I as Strategy Coordinator.

There were further recommendations, from the coordinator to establish the scheme, identified in the analysis

‘Recommendation: the role of Retention Tutor and Student Officer is formally defined to include support and liaison with the mentoring scheme – targeted recruitment of mentors at faculty level and targeted promotion to key academic staff including personal tutors’

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

From the analysis of the reports, I identified themes around networks, collaboration and support, which were further investigated in the interview with the coordinator. The themes were potential mechanisms and contexts and needed further exploration. The interview was semi-structured and designed to create an opportunity for the respondent (scheme coordinator) to explore and present their thoughts on the development of the mentoring initiative over the previous three years. The initial question was,

*Can you explain how the project developed, you got it established centrally, and made it more public, and how people responded to that, initially as a centrally located project?*

The subsequent questions explored

- *and then how you tried to get faculties to engage with it, (the project)?*
- *who used the project( faculties, departments, courses)?*
- *who was useful to you in developing / promoting the project within the institution?*
- *what would had made it easier to establish / develop the project?*



The analysis of the interview corroborated with the evidence from the report analysis in that there was a perceived lack of support from senior management,

‘I have always thought that Senior Management Team were lukewarm for their support of Peer Mentoring. Although we got funding year on year, it always seemed to be a final consideration, last minute. I was always found to be proving my worth with it. I didn't feel that student mentoring was well respected at X (University).’

(Interview, Mentoring Scheme Coordinator)

Analysing the interview, the references to ‘management support’ identifies individuals who are seen to be influential in being able to make things happen. These were at the position of Dean and above. The lack of support at this level was likely to have been a result of the way in which the annual reports from the scheme were presented within the institution, as discussed previously. Deans would only have been aware of the quantitative data relating to the numbers of mentors and mentees, presented at SEC, which gave a positive picture. They would not have been aware of the efforts to establish the scheme or its potential benefits to students, in terms of both the student experience and retention.

More specific are responses relating to the direct line manager of the project and the PVC. The coordinator viewed these as the potential ‘champions’ of the project, who could make a difference at an institutional level.

'I don't feel that A championed it as much as he could of, to the Senior Management Team. He supported it; I am not sure how much he believed in it as a support and development tool.'

(Interview, Mentoring Scheme Coordinator)

'The PVC championed Project A. I don't feel that I have achieved the same champion for Peer Mentoring, which is a shame'.

(Interview, Mentoring Scheme Coordinator)

The notion of 'champions' was important in breaking down barriers and gaining access to faculties. The coordinator referred to their own role in 'championing' the project and the use of others as 'champions' in faculties.

'But what I found useful was to get champions in the University in academic staff and there have been people who have championed this in various faculties and have taken it forward and believed in it...For example faculty A have always championed mentoring the students.'

(Interview, Mentoring Scheme Coordinator)

These champions then became part of the extended network of individuals who collaborated to promote the scheme and engage students as mentors or refer them as mentees. Much of this networking took place on an informal and partly social basis, conversations over coffee and in corridors, for example. Whilst the retention forum provided a locus for interested parties to discuss and

disseminate activities, these individuals were not academic staff or academic managers within the university but held student support and administrative roles. However, the role of the forum, with me as coordinator was worth further consideration, particularly as a catalyst in the development of retention initiatives.

In relation to the research question, *'How is evidence used at local and institutional levels to inform strategic planning?* It is possible to claim that:

1. At the institutional level, only part of the evidence, namely the quantitative data of the numbers of students engaged as mentors and mentees, was formally presented. This information demonstrated a successful project in terms of growth and for most senior managers (Deans and above) formed the extent of their knowledge and understanding of the project. At senior management level, two key individuals were aware of the entire project and the coordinators recommendations, yet appear to have done little to influence or support project development. There was no indication evidence was used to inform strategic planning at this level. The project received the same year on year funding (appendix 1) and there were no apparent attempts to embed the initiative across the institution or promote it at a senior level.
2. At a local level, the project coordinator developed networks with peers across the institution, primarily staff involved with retention projects and some academic staff acting as personal tutors. At this level, the project was disseminated verbally, with reference to both quantitative and



qualitative evidence of the schemes success. The evidence was not used to inform strategic planning per se. However, there was some evidence that at middle management level, the scheme was introduced as a part of a departmental retention strategy (Interview HOD 1).

<b>To what extent does the evidence demonstrate an impact on student retention?</b>
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There is sound evidence from the report analysis that the scheme had a positive impact on student retention from its introduction in 2003-4, even with relatively small numbers of mentees the responses to the questionnaire indicate that the majority of students had remained on course, partly because of the scheme

‘90% of respondents (student mentees) said mentoring had prevented them from dropping out’

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

The following year 86% of mentees had considered dropping out of university and had changed their mind after working with a mentor (appendix 6).

The scheme offered a particular type of peer support, students were allocated a mentor whom they could approach with any concerns and who would help them to develop ‘coping’ strategies. The approach had much in common with ‘life-coaching’ and had a positive effect on students’ self-esteem and confidence

‘I am a different person now; she really helped me find strategies to overcome my own self-perceptions, my lack of self motivation and my miserable self – esteem.’

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

That the mentor was a peer seemed to make a difference, students were comfortable discussing concerns with a fellow student where they may not have felt they could approach a tutor. In some instances, students had not received a satisfactory response from their tutor as indicated here

‘Many mentees had difficult or no relationship with academic staff and reluctant to seek help. Staff responses to them resulted in the lacking in confidence.’

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

This illustrates how students found relationships with some staff unsatisfactory and relied upon the support they received from their mentors. These findings are commensurate with earlier research in this area (Thomas, 2002).

‘My experience of mentoring was of real value; especially in the first few weeks. My mentor always gave good advice, didn’t judge, undermine or ridicule me...just able to give some words of encouragement.’

(Annual report 2006-7, appendix 6)

The areas where students felt they needed support are evident from the analysis. These correlate with those identified in previous research into student retention (Yorke and Longden, 2007). The importance of social integration in the first few weeks and the opportunity to make friends was key. The mentoring scheme addressed this issue through organised social events bringing together mentors and mentees. This was further reinforced by organised activities throughout the year such as fundraising events. A further feature of the scheme was annual awards for mentors and mentees who made significant achievements. Collectively, these activities in addition to the 1:1 mentoring created a community into which mentees were integrated.

‘Some mentees struggled to make friends, especially those living at home’

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

One of the areas mentees reported difficulty with was time management, particularly during the first year.

‘Most mentees had issues with time management – perceived HE study would be easy, by the time they were referred had huge workloads’

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

The strategies used to support students included ‘action planning’ and personal development planning, the latter encouraged students to reflect on their progress and take a proactive approach to their development. 95% of mentees



in 2004-5 were using these strategies and 91% agreed working with a mentor had helped develop time management skills (appendix 6).

Other areas included lack of motivation, compounded by family and relationship problems, illness, accommodation issues and choice of course. Research on student transition into higher education has identified transition as the point where the student was the most vulnerable (Yorke and Longden, 2007, Braxton and Hirschy, 2005, Bean, 2005). The mentoring scheme would pick up significant numbers of students through referral by Retention Tutors, Student Officers and some personal tutors, once it had been noticed a student was 'at risk'. This was usually identified through attendance monitoring processes and/or poor academic performance (appendix 6) Again, the network, which had developed, played a key role in referring students for support and subsequently in retaining students.

'Referrals are via Retention Tutors, Personal Tutors and Student Officers within faculties'

(Annual report 2004-5, appendix 6)

There was evidence from the analysis that the scheme had a significant impact on student retention. As research demonstrates the first year was crucial, once students progress to the second year they are less likely to leave,

'96% respondents feel confident moving into second year'

(Annual report 2003-4, appendix 6)

The location of the project, within a central support service and not faculty-based nor with formal links to faculties was key in discussing context-mechanism-outcome configurations

### 7.3 CMO Summary

The data analysis of the mentoring scheme revealed mechanisms identified in the initial study such as *participation*, *communication* and *awareness*, although these were evident within different contexts. Emergent at this stage of the research were mechanisms, such as *informal networks* and *champions*, which operated intra-institutionally producing positive outcomes.

**Table 7.4 A realistic summary on the introduction of Peer Mentoring**

Context	+	Mechanism	=	Outcome
<b>Initiative related</b>				
Centrally located initiative, outside formal organisational structure	+	<b>Accessibility</b> for students	=	High levels of student participation and retention
1:1 Support by peer on an individual needs basis	+	Right <b>support</b> at right time	=	Prevents withdrawal and increases engagement with university and develops an interest in mentoring
Students recruited to act as mentors	+	Voluntary <b>participation</b> in scheme with mentor training.	=	Broader educational value, engagement, participation and active citizenship.
Students entering HE lacking necessary life skills and emotional intelligence	+	Mentor <b>supports</b> skills development and personal coaching	=	Improved transferable skills for study in HE such as action planning, time

				management. Improved self – efficacy
<b>Institutional / organisation related</b>				
Collegial behaviour at an sub-institutional level in complex organisation	+	Development of <b>informal networks</b> of inter-faculty individuals	=	Increased awareness of the project at faculty level. Increased 'at risk' referrals by faculty
	+	Institution wide <b>informal 'forum'</b> for individuals involved with retention	=	Increased awareness of scheme across institution
Reporting processes for project outcomes by key SMT individuals are located within a formal management model	+	Little <b>dissemination</b> and <b>communication</b> through formal management process. Limited <b>awareness</b> of scheme by HODs and course leaders ( <i>blocking mechanism</i> )	=	Little engagement or support from HODs within departments
Centrally - located initiative, outside of formal management model. Located within an ambiguous management model.	+	Identification of <b>'champion (s)'</b> for the scheme.	=	Increased awareness within faculties and departments, leading to the subsequent growth of scheme.
	+	Limited <b>support</b> from key senior individuals ( <i>blocking mechanism</i> )	=	Disillusion, frustration of project coordinator



## **8. Student Officers**

A Student Officer (SO) was appointed to each faculty. The role existed prior to the Retention Strategy and was subsequently incorporated as an initiative in 2003 when the Strategy was established. The SOs were ex-students from the university appointed directly after graduation. The rationale was that they were close to the student body and therefore accepted as peers; also, their knowledge and understanding of the issues and challenges facing students would be current. In addition, they could represent the 'student voice' on faculty and central committees, important in light of Quality Assurance Agency's increasing focus on enhancement. They had a different function than the course representatives, but worked closely with reps and the Student Union on a range of issues, including recruitment and training. The posts were administrative support roles and fixed term for one-year. After the year, an SO could reapply, but two years was the maximum a post could be held, as a key element was that SOs were as close as possible to the student experience.

Initially the main function of the role was to provide a support service to students at faculty level, SOs provided impartial advice and guidance through an appointment system, 'drop-in' facility and on-line. As the role became established, SOs would deal with up to 70 emails a day, often referring students on to appropriate services. These would include the Student Service for counselling, financial and accommodation advice, academic study skills support and peer mentoring. Where the issues were academic related they worked with the Retention Tutors in faculties or directly with academic staff and Heads of Department to find resolutions. Their success was partly due to their location

within the faculty, their visibility and accessibility through various modes of communication.

Supporting transition to higher education, SOs played an active role at open days working with student volunteers and giving presentations from the students' perspective of being at university. They were also active in recruiting students as e-mentors to support new entrants prior to arrival and into their first year. During 'welcome week' for new first year students the SOs coordinated a range of activities and were pro-active in engaging students to come out of the halls of residence and participate in social events. They received some funding from the University Induction Planning Group to promote themselves and their service.

At faculty level, SOs recruited all course representatives for each programme and assisted the Student Union with training. They established email forums within faculties to communicate with reps and encourage their involvement at course committees. Through this process, they would also gather feedback on centrally - driven retention initiatives such as the Summer Support Scheme, by interviewing students and distributing questionnaires. Similarly, internal Student Satisfaction Surveys, the National Student Survey and the Early Experience Survey (post - induction to first year students) were promoted by the SOs locally through email and poster campaigns. Other faculty-based events, which they helped to coordinate, were 'Right Course Week' towards the end of the first term and 'Careers' events. Right Course Week was a retention initiative held in the second half of the first term providing advice and guidance for first year students who may feel they had made the wrong choice of course. The

University's own research with students who withdrew in their first year indicated that up to 30% of students did so because of making the wrong choice, corroborating with Yorke's (1999) research.

The SOs were key in supporting the development of the Peer Mentoring Scheme within the University, in addition to referring students who may benefit from a mentor they actively recruited mentors from within the faculties. This was essential as the scheme grew in popularity, the targeted recruitment of mentors enabled mentees to pair according to discipline, age or ethnicity.

The SOs were represented on a number of university committees, which gave them as a group an overview of institution-wide activities. Committee representation included the Teaching Environment Group, Retention Forum, Learning and Teaching Committees (at university and faculty), Student Experience Committees (at university and faculty), Central Induction Planning Group, and the Academic Development Unit's Management Group. Within their faculties, SOs attended Departmental Board Meetings and all Course Committee meetings.

The Heads of Administration were the line managers for SOs and the posts located in faculties funded centrally from the Retention Strategy. Integrated into admin teams they received staff development, guidance and mentoring, which was crucial to the success of the role. In addition, they were encouraged to work closely with the faculty Retention Tutors. As Strategy Coordinator, I had frequent discussions with Heads of Administration as to the progress of faculty-based initiatives over the three-year period. Without exception, there was



enormous support for the SO role and the impact they had supporting students within the faculty. Feedback from the SOs themselves indicates they felt they received the appropriate support and guidance in order to carry out their role.

To support one another SOs met weekly, this was informal and initiated by the group. These meetings, which I occasionally joined, became increasingly important as the roles became established and the scope of activity grew. The weekly meetings enabled SOs to pool their experiences and disseminate best practice in individual departments and faculties throughout the institution. They were also used to coordinate and plan activities and manage resources. Additionally, SOs communicated daily via email amongst themselves and later established a website to improve their support for and communication with students.

The team activity and collaboration was important to the development of the initiative, each year there would be new graduates in post. A pattern eventually emerged whereby one SO appointed for a second year would undertake an informal role as 'lead' SO, mentoring newer SOs. As a group, they produced a 'guidance' manual to facilitate continuation, adding material successively as the role developed.

As Retention Strategy Coordinator, I would join their meetings on a monthly basis, encouraging the development of these 'group working' practices and providing support where needed. Their roles often involved liaising between students and academic staff over sensitive issues associated with students' weak academic performance, poor attendance and lack of engagement. In

practice, this necessitated some sensitivity and good negotiating and mediation skills. Their personal development included assertiveness training, team building and developing influencing and negotiating skills. Student Services provided staff development for SOs on when and where to refer students for specialist advice and counselling. The success of the initiative was evident in terms of the impact they had on the student experience at both the individual 'student' and institutional levels. Institutional recognition as the University's 'Team of the Year' in 2006-7 acknowledged their contribution.

## **8.1 Data Collection**

To evaluate the role of the Student Officers I collected the following data:

1. Document analysis of the SOs annual report (2005-6)
2. Document analysis of the SOs submission for 'Team of the Year' award 2006
3. Interview with an SO
4. Document analysis of my notes from meetings with Heads of Administration.

The report from 2005-6 was selected as this was the year that all faculties had appointments in place, also the activities with which SOs were involved had increased each year. This report gave the most comprehensive information on the scope of activity as the role became established. The submission document for the award was useful as SOs aligned their activities with the institutions strategic vision and evidenced how they contributed to achieving this vision.

The interview with the SO took the form of the realist interview to further build theory, by corroborating or otherwise earlier findings. Of the four SOs in post one was a recent appointment and the first SO in the faculty, two were in their first year in post, although their faculties had established the role some time previously. The fourth SO, whom I selected, had done the role for almost two years and acted as a mentor to the others. My decision was based on the assumption that this SO would have a greater overview of the role and its relationship to other initiatives across the University.

In my role as Retention Coordinator, I met with faculty Heads of Administration on an individual basis. This was to discuss retention initiatives and financial management. Included were the SO role and its impact. The notes were useful in confirming or otherwise the findings from documents and the interview.

## **8.2 Data Analysis**

<b>What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity?</b>
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The University's evidence of the impact of the introduction of the Student Officer role was not formalised through a written reporting process either directly to senior management or through the Student Experience Committee. SOs were closely line managed by Heads of Administration and as mentioned usually integrated into administration teams. This relationship was key in relating knowledge about the SO activities to others within the University. Administrative Heads who in all cases spoke highly of the SOs knew their activities and the work they did and believed it had a recognisable impact on the student experience. The SO posts were funded through retention strategy monies, held



by the ADU and in my discussions with Administrative Heads confirmed this was the one initiative, which faculties unanimously wished to continue with. It appeared that there was a good working relationship between Administrative Heads and SOs

‘People like X the attendance support monitor, she is amazing. I wouldn't cope without people like her and Y (Administrative Head) and Z (Retention Tutor) she has been amazing. But I can't say there isn't a member of staff in my office, every person in the office has helped me.’

(Interview: SO)

The SOs were on most committees at faculty level except for the Faculty Executive Team, they also attended as many course committee meetings as possible. It was through their contribution at meetings that they made explicit evidence of the impact they had within the faculty. Within the University, an SO representative was included at institution-wide forums such as the Student Experience Committee, partnership forum and Strategic Management Group.

‘As a Team, we sit on faculty level Committees as well as University wide committees. New this year (2006-07) we have started to work with Alumni, Enterprise Team, Student Associate Scheme, Information Services and Human Resources as well as continuing the links that previous teams had already established.’

(Document analysis, SO reports)

The evidence of the success of the SO role was informal and descriptive (Jackson, 2004) and reported to university senior management via dialogue at meetings and through the Heads of Administration who openly acted as champions for the SO initiative. As recent graduates the SOs were closely line managed, consequently Administrative Heads had a clear idea of what they were involved in,

‘SOs are in daily contact with students to provide advice, resolve issues and answer queries. A typical day will involve dealing with about 20-30 emails and meeting with 6-8 students. At certain times such as assessments or induction, this can rise to 60 enquiries each day. This activity indicates the importance of the role to students and the level of confidence they have in their SO’

(Document analysis, Team Award)

SOs were visible to staff and students and their activity was recognised within faculties which was in contrast to the experience of some Retention Tutors. This may have been because they were recent graduates and were able to build different, possibly non-threatening relationships. In addition, their role appeared to have made a clear contribution to the student experience within the faculties, perhaps undertaking ‘jobs’ which had been previously neglected as in this case

‘This year I have successfully recruited in the region of three hundred and sixty Course Representatives from across the faculty. This was achieved through the discussions with Course Leaders and supported through promotion at induction talks, the Dean’s address

and the SO Teams presence at the SU Clubs and Societies fair. I assisted the SU Academic Affairs officer in the training of Faculty B Course Representatives'

(Document analysis, SO report)

Communication with students was a key priority for the SOs and they were heavily involved in student induction to provide support and promote their roles,

'The first semester was just hectic. You have to hit the ground running with this job, because I came in 21st August that doesn't give you a lot of time between, its like a month between starting a job and all the students being here. Then it was, I did 60 talks in the space of 2 weeks between the first years and second years and then you are into course reps and staff/student liaison meetings. I have never known anything like it... in this job. Absolutely mental'

(Interview, SO)

The SOs made a deliberate effort to communicate with departments and academic staff in order to build conducive working relationships. This involved some effort, on their part when appointed and they appear to have had support from HODs

'To establish myself? Hours and hours in the first two weeks. I met all the heads of department, which was really good in my first few weeks. I have heard a head of department saying to me before that



member of staff goes “well she's a student” and they go “No she's a member of staff”

(Interview, SO)

Although there were some tensions and on one hand SOs might have been supported because they were recent graduates, there was evidence that some academic staff took longer to accept the role

‘So I don't know whether certain members of staff find it difficult - Probably even now yes, I hate to say it the more traditional maybe academics find my role difficult to get their heads round. I think this year we have done well to try and overcome the kind of views around this role. We have been utilized a lot more and I have noticed this semester that I am utilized (laughs) I don't know whether it is word of mouth that I can actually be quite useful when it comes to certain things’

(Interview, SO)

The phrase ‘word of mouth’ illustrated how informal and anecdotal evidence of the SO role was, particularly at the stage SOs were establishing themselves. They established their role with knowledge of their activity spreading through dialogue from themselves and others, subsequently building a reputation. This has much in common with theories of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2001).

As the SOs dealt with student issues they moved into areas which were potentially problematic and sensitive to address and here they relied on and received support from HODs

‘So I then went to Head of Department and recalled the situation. I said “I know you’re going to be unhappy if you have got complaints against you and I understood that” but they had to understand my position and the fact that I was trying to better the situation and it wasn't that I was personally attacking the member of staff. The Head of Department was fantastic and was 100% behind me and we spoke beforehand and then we met with the member of staff and he explained the situation and the member of staff said they fully appreciate X's position and that was resolved really quite well. So, the support I have had from Heads of Department and lots of staff has been amazing.’

(Interview, SO)

The support and recognition for the role from administrative and academic heads was reliable evidence of the success of the SO initiative. By nature, anecdotal and informal it was equally valid and reliable as documented written reports or statistical evidence produced in the FRRs.

<b>How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform strategic development</b>
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As mentioned SOs were represented at most university committees,

‘Having a presence on committees gives the students a voice at the various levels of the institution and ensures that decisions made are student focused and user friendly, which has a direct affect on the student experience.’

(Document analysis, Team Award)

This quote indicates they thought their contributions were valued and made a difference to the decision-making process. The shift by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) towards a focus on quality enhancement rather than quality assurance in higher education was placing a greater emphasis on the student ‘voice’ and the student experience. This probably accounted for the focus on the SOs as a means of eliciting student feedback and although this was an informal discursive process, it indicates that evidence was utilised at institutional levels to inform planning. Importantly, the SOs were able to provide feedback on learning and teaching, previously retained within course evaluations and questionnaires.

‘From talking to students about their courses and attending staff-student liaison meetings / course committees we take current student concerns / suggestions about their teaching and learning experience to the appropriate forum for example faculty Teaching & Learning Committees as well as SMG’.

(Document analysis, Team Award)

At a local level, the SOs recognised it was easier to access some departments more than others. In their opinion, the way in which departments operated was



based on custom and practice. Their main concern was that some students, because of their physical location within the University might not be able to access support as easily as others might and SOs endeavoured to set up 'surgeries' or satellite centres.

'It's difficult for certain departments because they have been on their own or have different areas working in a certain way for so long. Some departments work in such an independent way'.

(Interview, SO)

This implied that they had successes where HODs supported their initiatives but less so when they did not. It appears that in some cases was no strategic lead from the Dean to coordinate activity and ensure parity across the faculty. It also replicated the experience of some Retention Tutors. Particularly with regard to access and identified the department and HOD as an independent functional unit.

'Due to the relatively low numbers accessing of the centralised support a need for widened access became apparent, in the form of departmental satellite support centres 'drop-in' centres'

(Document analysis, SO reports)

In the case of department 5, such support was established, as the HOD was supportive (Document analysis, SO reports) and in other cases as discussed previously this was blocked.

The SOs met regularly as a team. Their meetings were well established and semi-formal, usually in a nearby café. They discussed collaborative projects as well as individual faculty orientated activity. Their effective team-working was recognised by the University in 2006 when they won the 'Team of the Year'. SOs who had been in post longer supported and mentored newer SOs whilst they got used to the role. In addition, if one SO was particularly busy, with for example student surgeries, another would help out,

'Within the Team we have a healthy relationship that involves daily contact via emails and telephone. We also ensure that at least once a week we meet as a Team to talk about current issues and initiatives from both a Faculty and University perspective.

(Interview, SO)

Through this informal networking and participation in a range of committees, the SOs were able to promote and support a number of other retention initiatives. They recruited mentors within faculties for the Mentoring Scheme, advised students to use Study Skills Support, Student Services and the one-stop-shop. In this respect, evidence of the impact of their role was used locally, albeit not by managers but informally by themselves and colleagues across the institution.

'It is in the last couple of years that, as SOs, we have created an effective collaborative 'team working' approach to further develop and enhance the support we provide for students. This has enabled us to pool our experiences and disseminate best practice in individual departments and faculties across the institution.'

**To what extent does how the evidence is used impact on student retention?**

Evidence that the SO role was making a difference to student retention could be drawn from the way in which students used the SOs for advice and support. This was not documented as quantitative data that demonstrated the numbers of students, but as informal evidence derived from discourse between individuals and at committees and meetings. Much was informal and although SOs were involved in a wide range of initiatives as documented in their reports it is less easy to quantify. The scope of activity involving students inevitably contributed to student engagement and subsequently retention.

However, the evidence per se was not utilised in a formal way. For example where an initiative had been popular with students in one department it was not necessarily introduced across the faculty or university, unless the SO was able to do so under their own volition.

That the evidence was informal and anecdotal meant management did not readily acknowledge it. It was not until 2005 that there was an SO in each faculty. Although funding for the post was provided centrally, one faculty had refused to appoint an SO as they could not see the reason for such a post. This was changed when the other SOs met with the Dean to explain what they did and their contribution to the student experience. This was an example of the autonomy faculties and departments had within the university, particularly how this prevented the implementation of initiatives to improve retention.



### 8.3 CMO Summary

The analysis of data from this initiative indicated similar mechanisms were effective for different groups within different contexts. Where management *support* was effective for individuals introducing initiatives into faculties or department, support was also an effective mechanism for student engagement. Likewise *informal cross-institutional networking* was effective in the development of the SO initiative over the period of time.

**Table 8.1 A realistic summary of the role of Student Officers on retention**

Context	+	Mechanism	=	Outcome
<b>Student Officer role introduced plus:</b>				
Faculty based position, located locally	+	Introduces an <b>accessible and visible</b> 'peer' who provides <b>support</b>	=	Students engage with their problems / issues, which are identified and can be then be acted upon.
			=	Potential threat to some academic staff who resist access.
Non-management and non-academic post which has undefined status	+	Individual has strong <b>communication, negotiation</b> and <b>networking</b> skills	=	Engages academic staff with student issues, gains access to meetings
	+	Internal <b>management support</b> eg. senior administrator, Dean ( <i>also potential blocking mechanism if absent</i> )	=	Establishes a status, gains access and acceptance
Collegial behaviours at sub-institutional	+	Development of <b>informal SO network</b>	=	Raises profile of activity and thus

level within complex organisation				status. Pooling of expertise and resources. Co-creation of resources
	+	Develop <b>informal cross-institutional networks</b> with other projects and agencies	=	Collaborative activities to support retention and development of new initiatives.

## **9. Retention Tutors**

### **Scope and Development of the Retention Tutor role**

The PVC established the Retention Tutor (RT) role, in 2003 as part of the Retention Strategy. These faculty-based academic roles were at senior lecturer level and full time fixed term (3-year) appointments. One Retention Tutor was appointed to each faculty with three of the four appointments external. All Retention Tutors had experience of working with diversity and students from widening participation backgrounds, from other institutions, some of which included work in the FE sector and were recruited because of this experience.

The primary focus of the role, as outlined in the job description, was to identify 'at risk' students in liaison with academic and support staff, and provide the appropriate support and guidance. 'At risk' students were those considered likely to fail or withdraw from university and were identifiable by weak academic performance, poor attendance and lack of engagement. The rationale for the role was to alleviate the burden on academic staff by providing additional support and consequently improve student retention. Faculties received funding to cover the cost of the post from retention monies.

In theory, academic staff would refer students to the Retention Tutor for tutorial guidance; the Retention Tutor would then continue to monitor the student and their progress, maintaining communication with the student's personal tutor. Faculty-based administrative attendance monitors, funded under the Retention Strategy, worked closely with the Retention Tutors to identify students and assisted with attendance tracking. Faculty-level attendance monitoring procedures were closely scrutinised and improved in 2005-6 across the



University, at the request of the PVC who considered this a key initiative in improving retention rates. This resulted in faculties establishing responsive procedures to non-attendance, which alerted the relevant key staff. In some cases the key member of staff would be the Retention Tutor as opposed to academic staff or the Personal Tutor.

The Personal Tutor role was introduced and implemented institution – wide in 2005-6. Each student allocated a Personal Tutor on arrival at the University. The Personal Tutor would meet with their students during induction and subsequently at least once a term, the focus of the role was around pastoral and academic support. There was variation in the way in which the role developed across the university and different degrees of clarity. Some departments combined this with the first year tutor role and one member of staff could be personal tutor to a significant number of students, whereas other models incorporated the role with personal development planning activities embedded in modules. The former tended to be very ‘hands off’ and support was given on a ‘needs’ basis initiated by the student. The latter example allocated ‘teaching contact’ time to the activity, hence providing resources and recognition. How this was managed, affected the Retention Tutors role at faculty level. The Retention Tutor initiative preceded both attendance monitoring and the personal tutor initiatives, which meant initially the RTs worked quite independently within faculties and without other ‘support’ staff. They relied upon developing relationships with academic staff in order to carry out their role successfully.

There were some activities, which were common to the role in each faculty in that all Retention Tutors were involved in working with support agencies across the university to improve retention. These included the Peer Mentoring Scheme, Academic Study Skills Support, Student Services, Student Union, Student Officers and the Academic Development Unit. In addition, all were involved within faculties in providing student advice and guidance, organising induction events and workshops, coordinating winter and summer support schemes, developing personal tutor workshops and undertaking 'exit' interviews with withdrawn students. At the time of data collection for this study all Retention Tutors were engaged to some extent in research and publication relevant to their retention activities and external networking at conferences and workshops.

In each faculty, the Retention Tutor contributed to Learning and Teaching Committees. Across the University, they were represented on the university Induction Planning Group, Student Experience Committee and Learning and Teaching Committee and the Retention Forum. The Retention Tutors all made significant contributions to the annual faculty Retention Reports, providing some contextual analysis to support the quantitative data on progression and achievement. However, they were not included on Faculty Executive Teams, nor automatically included on departmental committees, which were the two of the key decision – making 'management' groups.

In addition, each Retention Tutor was engaged in activities, which were specific to their particular faculty, for example targeted support for specific departments or courses.

## **Central and Faculty Management**

At faculty level, Retention Tutors were line managed by the Deans. The Dean in consultation with the Head of Administration identified the scope of the role and identified activities, which were relevant to the faculty. On a day-to-day basis, Heads of Administration effectively managed the Retention Tutors and in some cases, much of the reporting appears to have gone via this route. At the point at which I became Strategy Coordinator, there was a lack of clarification around their role and its function. Consequently, Retention Tutors were drawn into attendance monitoring and administrative activity, probably as the implementation of these activities was the remit of Heads of Administration. The primary focus of the role, providing academic and pastoral support to 'at risk' students had become diminished. In my role, I would meet with Deans to discuss retention activity and worked to clarify the role and refocus it towards its initial intended purposes.

As a group, Retention Tutors met informally every few weeks, usually in a café near the university. The meetings were self-initiated and did not follow a specific agenda. Originally, the purpose of these meetings was to provide mutual support and discuss ways to enhance their roles within faculties and the university. Their discussions tended to cover the activities they were involved in, successes and frustrations. As the Strategy Coordinator, I occasionally joined the meetings and encouraged them to share practice. That they had differing channels of communication and reporting mechanisms within their faculties was a concern and a potentially contributory factor to their effectiveness. We agreed to hold an 'away-day', facilitated by myself, to examine the scope of activity and reflect upon the likely barriers and enablers.



## 9.1 Data Collection

### 9.1.1 Documentary Analysis

For the purpose of this study, I undertook a documentary analysis of the outcomes of the 'away day' with Retention Tutors. The structure of the 'away-day' involved each Retention Tutor describing their role within faculties and the cross-institutional initiatives with which they were involved, this helped to determine activities common to each participant. It also identified how Retention Tutors had raised awareness about student retention issues and highlighted the success they had in changing practice and thinking. The second part of the event was structured to uncover issues or barriers, which were perceived to inhibit them carrying out their roles and subsequent effectiveness in improving student retention. These were wide-ranging and broadly related to management, resources, status, institutional culture and support. The final part of the day focussed on how these might be overcome and the role the ADU might take in addressing some of the issues raised. The outcome of the discussions was a report intended for the ADU and senior management. In addition, I had my own notes of the discussions, which took place. The themes used to analyse the documentation were derived from Holsti (1969) in that each was distinct and mutually exclusive. However, in order to develop cumulative knowledge and contribute to my understanding of phenomena the categories reflected themes that had emerged from my earlier research. The data was analysed under the following themes:

- *Retention activities (projects / initiatives)*, these include activities common to all RTs and therefore institution-wide and other projects relevant to the specific faculty.
- *Retention activities (Forums / committees / networks)*

- *Management Support*, perceptions of support from faculty and senior management
- *Resources*
- *Status*, perceptions of the role by others (academic staff) and management
- *Institutional Culture*, behaviours, attitudes, barriers and enablers.

I had also analysed the reports submitted by Retention Tutors as part of the Faculty Retention Reports. The FRRs analysed as part of the first phase of the study provided detailed evidence to corroborate or otherwise with the findings of the ‘away-day’ documentary analysis. However, only three FRRs included a report from the Retention Tutor. In all these cases, the Retention Tutors commentary was restricted to the projects and initiatives with which they were involved, for example: providing tutorial support to students. The reports lacked any evaluation of the initiatives or quantitative data, such as indicating how many students had been supported through tutorials. Table 9.1 indicates the relationship between my research questions and the themes used for documentary analysis.

**Table 9.1 The relationship between research questions and document analysis**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Documentary analysis themes</b>
What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity?	Retention activities ( projects and initiatives) Retention activities ( forums / committees / networks)
How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform future	Status Management support

strategy?	
To what extent does the evidence demonstrate an impact on student retention?	Institutional culture Resources Retention activities ( projects and initiatives)

**9.1.2 Interviews with Retention Tutors**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that in order to construct realistic data, the collection methods ought to be theory driven. The theory being a *realist theory* of the CMO configurations which define how the initiative works. The interviews conducted in the early part of the study, particularly in relation to data management and the retention reports, were exploratory in order to establish CMO configurations in relation to the retention initiatives. For this reason, I argued a semi-structured approach was appropriate. The analysis of those initiatives identified a number of CMO configurations from which to begin to develop theory, which related to the key questions. The documentary analysis of the ‘away day’ indicates configurations around similar themes. The key themes are around *management engagement and support, status and networks*. Therefore, it was appropriate at this stage to use a realistic approach to the interviews, which would enable me to test some of the emerging mechanisms from previous phases and subsequently refine theory. This was a semi-structured approach using questions, which would enable further inquiry. However, some of the questions were informed by earlier data analysis and the themes identified above. The questions were also formulated in order to test emerging theory derived from the mechanisms and contexts identified in the FRRs and peer mentoring. In realistic evaluation this is defined as,



‘The researcher’s theory is the subject matter of the interview and the subject (stakeholder) is there to confirm, to falsify and, above all, to refine that theory’

(Pawson and Tilley, 1997 p159)

Initially, I conducted an in-depth interview lasting 75 minutes with the Retention Tutor in faculty B. I approached this Retention Tutor as they had been in post since the role was established. As a result, he had an overview of the role as it had developed and had been involved in a range of initiatives both within the faculty and across the University. A second interview was conducted by telephone with the Retention Tutor in faculty A, who had been in post less time but felt they had achieved considerable progress. This was a shorter interview and focussed specifically on some the themes of *management support* and *status*. I used this interview to refine some of the CMO configurations, which were emerging.

Describing realistic data construction, Pawson and Tilley (1997 p160) stress the importance of identifying ‘who might know’ about a particular programme as well as ‘what is to know’ and ‘how to ask’. From this, the distinction is drawn between practitioners, evaluators and subjects each of whom might have different knowledge and experience of the program depending upon their role. Arguably, on one level the Retention Tutors were ‘subjects’ of the Retention Strategy and on another they were the ‘practitioners’. They were practitioners in their role of creating interventions at faculty level, such as providing student advice and guidance, which may have resulted in a student staying on course. In this role, they adapted the initiative to gain the most success with the

subjects, in this case the students. Pawson and Tilley (1997 p161) argue that in this role they would have been unable 'to abstract, to typify and generalize their understanding' of the whole initiative as the nature of their working relationships was too real and 'highly personal'. There was some evidence that this was the case from the data analysis.

However, the Retention Tutors were subjects themselves in a different context, namely their relationships with academic staff and interface with faculty and senior management. Here their position was largely fixed within the organisational structure and culture. As subjects, they were likely to be more sensitized to the mechanisms, rather than the contexts and outcomes (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

## **9.2 Data Analysis**

**What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of reliability and validity?**

Formally, Retention Tutors had an input into the Faculty Retention Reports; as discussed above their input was descriptive narrative referring to the activities they were engaged with. The reports were reliable as discussed in the initial part of this study; however, there was little evidence, which linked their activities to student retention. Some evidence as to the numbers of 'at risk' students counselled or contacted and from which programmes indicating the outcome of the intervention, would have given the reports greater validity. From the institutional perspective, this was the only written report produced which reached beyond the faculty. The other way in which evidence would have been available would be through meetings with line managers, the Dean or Head of

Administration. As the data analysis indicated this was variable in most cases and the line management of Retention Tutors ambiguous,

‘Lines of support from management need to be strengthened and clarified. This will help remove ambiguities that can inhibit the development of initiatives and reduce corporate ownership of retention activities’

(Document analysis, away day)

The Retention Tutor in faculty B whose meetings with the Dean or Head of Administration could be six months apart further elaborated upon this,

Interviewer: ‘So who actually line managed you do you think?’

Retention Tutor: ‘Nobody’

Interviewer: ‘Nobody?’

Retention Tutor: ‘Nobody at all’

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

In this situation any evidence of the effectiveness of the role, which might have been captured through dialogue was lost. In addition, there was noticeable dissatisfaction amongst some Retention Tutors who felt their achievements and efforts went unnoticed. They interpreted this as a lack of support from senior management and questioned why the posts had been created if they were not supported. In relation to the initiative to implement personal tutoring, Retention Tutors held workshops for staff in faculties. This was a centrally driven initiative



and had been introduced some eighteen months earlier. This response was to a question about the type of support from faculty and departmental management:

‘No, no nothing at all and Head of Administration wasn’t as supportive about it either, so as you don’t have either (Dean or Head of Administration).’

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

The University did not have in place mechanisms by which the Retention Tutors could make these issues known. Their comments were evidence to the fact that they were unable to carry out their roles effectively. Although this evidence was possibly contentious and descriptive (Jackson, 2004), it was key in identifying the barriers to institutional development as indicated here,

‘Its very hard because the lack of communication from the middle and senior management makes it that you’re working in a vacuum, so much that you can do and the service you can give to the students is better but its not as good as if you had actually got someone flying the flag for you and pushing it forward’

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

That there was an apparent lack of support at the level of faculty was a recurrent theme in both the away-day documentation and the interviews. It appears to have had an impact on the role, from the Tutors’ perspective in each of the four faculties. Their collective view from the away-day was that the Dean

ought to line manage the posts and they themselves ought to be included faculty level groups related to retention.

### **9.2.1 Relationships with Departments**

Beyond the formal line management route evidence of the effectiveness or otherwise of the Retention Tutor role would have been via Heads of Departments, who were in a position to report on retention activity at management meetings. Where there was receptiveness from the HOD the Retention Tutors were able to gain access and build positive working relationships. In relation to department 3 the Retention Tutor commented

‘Yes he did support it all, it was certainly useful having a first year tutor and useful having that embryonic personal tutor system, if we actually could have engaged staff a bit more it would have been great’

Again where a problem was recognised and support from the Retention Tutor encouraged interventions were initiated,

‘Whereas (HOD 5) said ‘we’ve got a problem come and help us sort it out, which was great’

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

This resulted in a range of local ‘surgeries’ for students, a departmental personal tutorial programme and attendance monitoring with interventions for ‘at risk’ students established very quickly. The HOD through FET reported the

success of these initiatives to the Dean, in a bid to use more of the RT's time. Although, there were successful initiatives established in this department, access to other departments in the faculty was not facilitated in any way and there was a noticeable difference in the receptiveness of HODs to the Retention Tutor's attempts to engage with these departments.

'I had tremendous difficulty with (Department 2) and (Department 6). The HOD (6) told me they had no problems with retention and sat there for 2 minutes after they said it in complete silence, honestly not willing to engage in further conversation. So I said "I'll go now shall I".'

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

This indicated the level of resistance to the role of Retention Tutor in some cases. Managers at HOD level could effectively block an initiative if they did not wish to engage with it, without any intervention from a Dean, this became the status quo. In this instance, Department 6 had an attrition rate was over 13% (2005-6) having deteriorated by 3%, from 10% the previous year. The same reason for blocking access was given by HOD 2 leading to the following observation

'I think there are pockets of good practice and that's wonderful and it's the good practice that we could roll out and it would be brilliant. But they won't because it could be perceived as having a problem...by letting us in.'

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)



Here the attrition rate was lower at 10% and was improving, nonetheless the evidence of any successful strategies was not disseminated, even locally within the faculty. This inhibited the sharing of good practice locally and could have no influence in future strategic development.

<b>How is evidence utilised at local and institutional levels to inform strategic development</b>
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As discussed, the formal evidence from the Retention Tutor role was limited and lack of communication in most cases inhibited anecdotal evidence relating to success or otherwise from reaching faculty and certainly Senior Management. Consequently, at an institutional level, there was no evidence to inform strategic development and at faculty or departmental level, this was prohibited by lack of engagement from Deans or HODs.

The exception to the above scenario was in faculty A, where the RT met with the Dean on a monthly basis to report on his activity and progress with initiatives. The initial focus for the role was attendance monitoring, implemented across the faculty in conjunction with Data Officers and the Head of Administration. Once established the RT then focussed on introducing personal tutoring, running workshops for staff and piloting different models of group tutorial activity. Much of this was initiated through a faculty-based retention forum chaired by the Retention Tutor. The forum included departmental representatives and some HODs as well as Student Officer and key administrators. The Retention Tutor also reported on retention activity at Faculty Executive Team meetings and maintained a profile for retention activity by producing regular reports. Other RTs recognised the success of this activity

‘As (Retention Tutor) has shown in (faculty A) yes, it's a really good indicator of helping students (attendance monitoring and personal tutoring), I think the problems with it was that it wasn't supported by any of the really middle management’ (in faculty B)

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

The involvement of the Dean appears to have been important. I conducted a telephone interview with this Retention Tutor (faculty A) to establish the extent the involvement and it appeared to have been minimal. The RT described it as ‘endorsing’ what they were trying to achieve which appears to have given the initiatives credibility with academic staff. Also ensuring that HODs engaged by attending and contributing to the retention forum gave a ‘visible support’ to the RT’s work.

The Retention Tutor pro-actively promoted retention activities and would ‘knock on doors’ to gather support from academic staff. The support from management and dissemination of activity at FET and the retention forum resulted in a coherent and integrated model for attendance monitoring and intervention across the faculty. The models of personal tutoring were evaluated and disseminated internally and externally at national conferences, resulting in the activity eventually included as part of academic workload planning. Here the evidence of success was clearly used to inform strategic planning at a faculty level.

### **9.2.2 Status and Recognition**

At the away-day all Retention Tutors discussed issues concerning status and recognition. They believed their low status and lack of recognition of their role was a barrier to progressing retention activity. In part, this is discussed in the previous section and can be attributed to lack of engagement and recognition by management, particularly at a faculty and Departmental level. In order to achieve a more 'influential status' they highlighted the following:

1. Retention Tutors should be employed on permanent, full time contracts, which would raise the profile and perception of Retention Tutors and would provide the opportunity for long and medium term planning of retention strategies.
2. Resources are crucial at both central and faculty level. Funds should be transparent and easy to access.
3. The quality of retention work would be increased by dedicated clerical and administrative support, especially in attendance monitoring procedures and in the identification of students "at risk".
4. Retention must be promoted as a high level activity within the institution and in defining faculty priorities, to support the effective functioning of Retention Tutors.



This reinforced the view of Retention Tutor, faculty B earlier that the role has been established and perhaps not thought through fully or given the necessary resources to implement initiatives.

<b>To what extent does how the evidence is used impact on student retention</b>
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Determining the extent to which how evidence is used impacts on retention is less clear. I would argue that in the case of the Retention Tutor in faculty A, evidence of successful initiatives was disseminated and initiatives implemented across the faculty. However, there was a slight increase in attrition of around 1% between 2004-5 and 2005-6 across the faculty, the period when these initiatives were introduced. It is possible that it requires a further cohort of students, with the initiatives in place to see a noticeable difference, particularly as these were faculty- wide initiatives.

Where Retention Tutor, faculty B worked closely with department 6 on a range of activities, retention improved by 11% between 2004-5 and 2005-6. Here the activities were focussed at programme or departmental level and were specific to the needs of the department which had a number of part-time students. This illustrated how appropriate activity at the right level could have impact.

### **9.2.3 Informal Networking**

At a local level, Retention Tutors were part of an extensive informal network, which included key personnel from Academic Skills Support, Peer Mentoring, Student Officers, Student Services, Induction Planning Party, Accommodation and the Students Union. Within this arena, they disseminated their activities and

supported the development of other retention initiatives. In this respect, there is evidence that their role was effective as their skills and expertise were utilised by colleagues to develop and promote retention activity across the university.

‘I think that collaboration around the Retention Tutor role was very positive. I mean my view is really perhaps there's been some very strong networks developed in this institution, but I'm not sure how, I think we are very self - supportive of one another in a way, you know about trying to break down barriers and things’

(Interview, Retention Tutor, faculty B)

### 9.3 CMO Summary

The analysis of the Retention Tutor initiative indicated mechanisms evident in earlier stages of this study. The analysis here contributed to the different contexts within which these mechanisms are ineffective, in particular political and formal management models and bureaucratic behaviours.

**Table 9.2. Realistic summary of the introduction of Retention Tutors**

Context	+	Mechanism	=	Outcome
<b>Retention Tutor role introduced plus:</b>				
Collegial behaviour at sub-unit level initiated by HOD	+	<b>Access</b> to departments, departmental staff and management plus opportunity for <b>dialogue (communication)</b>	=	Range of retention initiatives introduced at local (programme/departmental) level. Some improvement in retention

Formal management structure and bureaucratic behaviour at faculty level	+	<b>Support and recognition</b> from the Dean for RT initiatives, through dialogue and involvement.	=	Range of retention initiatives piloted and subsequently introduced across the faculty.
Political behaviour at faculty level plus ambiguous management model	+	Lack of clarity over line management of RTs and <b>ambiguity</b> around the role ( <i>blocking mechanism</i> )	=	RTs disaffected by ambiguity and lack of support.
Political behaviour at sub-unit level by HOD's	+	<b>Access</b> to departments is <b>controlled and restricted</b> ( <i>blocking mechanism</i> )	=	Retention initiatives not introduced, poor communication of central retention initiatives and available support for students. Course leaders unaware of support. In some cases attrition increases.



## 10. Institutional Networking

My analysis of the retention initiatives indicated that the emergence of intra-institutional networks were effective in progressing the development of much activity. As such, I considered the contexts within which they emerged worth further study. These networks informed development at local levels, but on an informal basis rather than strategically. They were institution wide and involved academic and non-academic staff both within faculties and centrally. Collectively, key individuals met at the Induction Planning Party meetings, as the focus of student induction was orientated towards student engagement and involved staff from retention initiatives, such as the 'one-stop-shop' student advice centre, peer mentoring and academic skills support. In addition, I initiated and chaired the Retention Forum as part of my role, which brought together the same group of individuals three times a year. Undoubtedly, Retention Tutors and Student Officers played a key role in promoting the various initiatives within faculties, contributing to the development of centrally located schemes such as mentoring, and study skills support. This was reflected in the growth of these initiatives as outlined in table 10.1.

**Table 10.1 Student engagement with centrally located retention initiatives**

Retention Initiative	2003-4	2004-5	2005-6
One – stop - shop	28,000 enquiries	58,000 enquiries	
Peer mentoring scheme	200 mentees		1284 mentees
Academic study skills	1:1 Tutorials 327 Workshops 684		1:1 Tutorials 543 Workshops 993

The CMO relationships in this section are derived from the data analysis of the selected initiatives. As my research progressed, it became apparent that some CMO configurations were conducive to positive outcomes and change and these emerged through different processes operating beyond the formal organisation structure.

**Table 10.2 Summary of CMOs related to networks**

Context	+	Mechanism	=	Outcome
Formal management at local (Departmental / Faculty) levels within large organisation, bureaucratic behaviours	+	Individuals with opportunity to adapt structures through <b>informal processes</b> and <b>communication</b>	=	Emergence of self-supporting networks
Environment created within participatory informal networks plus collegial behaviour	+	Introduction of <b>spontaneous actions and initiatives</b> independent of formal structures	=	Connectedness across the institution, increased dialogue and engagement leading to increase in retention activity.
Environment created within participatory informal networks plus collegial behaviour	+	Emergence of <b>self-identified 'champions'</b> for initiatives	=	Greater awareness leading to increase in retention activity.
Large complex organisation, opportunity for communication and collaboration	+	Development of <b>cross institutional networks</b>	=	Increased dissemination of initiatives, and development of self-supporting peer systems. Increased awareness of and engagement with retention initiatives by students

## 11. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 11.1 Conclusions to Research Questions

This study originated because of my role as the coordinator of an institution-wide retention strategy in a large post '92 university. The strategy claimed to take an 'evidence-based' approach to student retention and led to the introduction of a wide range of initiatives. At the time it was introduced in 2003, there was considerable discourse around the use of 'evidence' in informing education policy, including what might be considered as evidence and how it might inform policy and subsequently practice. The main literature relating to *evidence-based* and *evidence-informed* approaches are reviewed as part of this study. The key papers in relation to higher education practice emerged from the Higher Education Academy led Mike Daniels Symposium in 2004 (Jackson *et al.* 2004). This led to my interest in what was considered *evidence* within the institution in relation to the retention strategy and the first research question; *what constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of its reliability and validity?*

<b>What constitutes evidence within the university and the nature of available evidence in terms of its reliability and validity?</b>
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What constituted evidence within the university can be discussed from two perspectives. Firstly, there was the evidence requested by the University in the form of reports, which were quantitative data reports on retention, progression and achievement and periodic progress reports from the various initiatives. My study revealed that a distinction was drawn based on the nature or type of evidence. There was a status afforded to quantitative data, usually presented in



reports, which was deemed both valid and reliable by senior managers within the university. This type of evidence was an example of explicit knowledge transferred in a recognised format and codified for accessibility (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995)

There was a wealth of evidence identified through this research which was not recognised by the university, and which remained unacknowledged. This included reports, away-days, meetings, networks. Some of this was explicit, as in reports from Student Officers and the Peer Mentoring Scheme, which were not progressed through the institution to the key personnel. Consequently, individuals who could act on recommendations and influence events at the appropriate levels were unaware of any good practice or challenges. Other evidence took the form of narratives, knowledge networks and self-organising groups. This evidence is descriptive and some is incidental, as in the activities of loosely formed networks, but I argue this was an equally important type of evidence. This is the second perspective and the evidence that existed here remained unrecognised.

Examples of the former body of evidence include the data reports resulting from the data management project, the faculty retention reports and annual reports from the peer-mentoring scheme. These were transparent and tangible documents, which provided explicit knowledge pertaining to the impact of an initiative on retention and the student experience. As forms of evidence, they are commensurate with a rationalist teleology whereby an individual, for use by the organization (Stacey, 2001), creates knowledge. This is the type of evidence expected from a planned approach to strategy implementation or

‘strategy by design’ in that it articulates the changes resulting from the introduction of an initiative or strategy (Johnson and Scholes, 2002).

However, it was important to consider the reliability and validity of the evidence, and the study indicates that, although the evidence was explicit, both were variable. The data management project had, through a rigorous process involving individuals across all faculties in developing and testing the data report, resulted in reliable and valid quantitative information. The data report was run at the same time in successive years, creating an evidence base from which trends in student retention, progression and achievement could be identified. However, this reliability and validity was not necessarily the perception of some HODs who queried both validity and reliability based on their local knowledge at a sub-unit level. How these perceptions influenced their use of the evidence within departments is discussed later.

This quantitative data was included within the FRRs alongside narrative providing a context and further narrative relating to other activities within each faculty. The validity and reliability of this evidence were variable. When analysed using a number of key themes, which examined the levels of consultation, authorship, authority and activity, it was apparent there was variation across the institution. A rigorous approach, involving wide consultation, detailed analysis and authorised by the Dean resulted in a report I considered reliable and valid. By comparison, a report authored by administrators with little engagement from academic managers appeared to ‘paint a picture’ rather than provide robust evidence. Here the response was mechanistic and provides little evidence of real activity or impact. There appeared to be political organisational

behaviour at faculty and departmental levels with little engagement from HODs in the production of information. Although the reports were compiled with common headings, (appendix 2) the disparity in quality prohibited a comprehensive institution-wide perspective. In this instance, despite the senior management request for retention reports through a formal management structure, the reliability of the evidence was compromised by lack of engagement locally.

In evaluating the peer-mentoring scheme, a methodology was used that had been developed as part of a project in another institution. This provided a clear framework for evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative data. As a result, the reports were evidence-based and valid. The use of the same methodology in successive years enabled the comparison of data and identification of trends.

Where the context can be described as a formal management model with prevalent bureaucratic behaviours, there are two key mechanisms, which ensure valid and reliable explicit evidence. Firstly, the nature of the data required should be articulated using an identified framework or methodology. This approach would create comparative evidence and facilitate an institution-wide overview, and in time, the cumulation of evidence would form a reliable basis for future strategy. The second mechanism is the engagement of appropriate academic managers with the process, creating ownership. The disparity in this instance arose where the formal model operating at an institutional level, led to setting objectives and assumed compliance, not giving recognition to different models and behaviours at a local level (Bush, 1995).



Trowler *et al.* (2003, p12) argue that 'universities are (still) loosely coupled organizations' and an understanding of local context is required to embed any change successfully. The local context being determined by the staff that operates within them, their preferred behaviours, beliefs and values. *Engagement* as the key mechanism; however, is dependant upon an understanding of context to be effective, which at the level of faculty may have been collegial rather than bureaucratic.

The second type of evidence, which became apparent as a result of this study, was by nature informal and to some extent anecdotal. I considered this as evidence, made explicit through the research process, in particular through interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis of meetings. By its very nature, it is not immediately visible or available within the institution. Without this study, it would have remained part of the dialogues and conversations which took place on a daily basis within the institution. Whereas some of these conversations were informal, they also included the discussions between Retention Tutors and Heads of Administration, where there was a line management element, which influenced the success of the initiative. This is discussed in detail later in this section.

As a form of knowledge, much of this was tacit and conveyed through discourse between individuals working on the various initiatives (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Stacey, 2001). It is by nature socially constructed and based in individuals rather than the institution. This type of evidence became evident through the analysis of interviews with Retention Tutors, Student Officers and Heads of Departments and informal project reports. I considered these reports

informal, as they were co-created and initiated by groups or individuals, compared to the formal reports requested at a senior management level. An example includes the SO report of their activities. I conclude that this type of evidence also has validity in that it can accurately represent the situation or context to which it refers (Open University, 2001 p27). Whereas its certainty cannot be absolutely assured, when considered in conjunction with evidence from a number of sources it has contributed to the explanation or description of a phenomenon.

In terms of its reliability, the very nature of this evidence was relative to the social constructs of individuals and groups of individuals involved and as such cannot be definite. It was constructed from their experiences and representative of their beliefs and values. However, I argue it has a particular relevance to the evaluation of a multi-faceted strategy located within a complex organisational environment in encouraging a holistic approach rather than 'cause and effect' thinking. Within the institution, this study demonstrates this was not considered as evidence and the focus was on quantitative data and formally requested information. This is further expanded upon in relation to the remaining research questions.

<b>How is evidence used at local and institutional levels to inform strategic developments?</b>
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In defining the rationale and focus for this study, I discussed the key principles of the retention strategy which determined the reasons why the university had adopted an evidence-based approach. The then current external political drivers for an evidence-based approach in education were discussed in the literature

review and this debate was influential at the time the strategy was developed in 2003.

I also developed a model of how evidence was used and its impact (figure 4.2) which at the outset of the study I considered straightforward, in that evidence was either used or not used. The conclusions drawn in relation to the first research question demonstrate that the 'evidence' itself was varied and complex and my conclusions as to how it was used are similarly multi faceted. In drawing conclusions in relation to the second research question I have reconsidered what I intended by the statement 'informing strategic developments' and identified the three contexts within which evidence was used as; *institutional level, faculty and departmental (local) level and intra-institutionally.*

### **Informing strategic developments**

I had initially intended 'informing strategic developments' to mean how evidence was used to further inform the strategy and hence the development of the initiatives. This thinking was influenced by key principles of transparency, rewarding success and sharing good practice outlined in the original strategy. The implication here was that as the three-year strategy was implemented, there would be some form of evaluation of the initiatives, which would measure effectiveness and readjust resources accordingly. The channels by which this could be achieved would be either through the formal academic structure involving Deans and HODs or through the appropriate central service where an initiative was located. Either way an institutional overview at a senior



management level was required in order to effect further development of the strategy.

This study demonstrates that although some of the evidence was used to inform strategic development, this was a small amount of the evidence available. However, various individuals within the institution used much of the available evidence strategically and usefully, and this activity had an impact on the development of some initiatives and student retention.

### **Use of evidence at institutional level**

The outcome of the data management project, which resulted in bi-annual reports on student retention, was the primary form of evidence used at institutional level. The data was used at an institutional level to set annual departmental targets for student retention. This was a strategic development on the part of the university as it had not been in situ previously. The faculty retention reports were received at institutional level more as an assurance that appropriate activity was in place at local levels, rather than to inform strategic development (sections 6.1.5 and 6.1.6). The evidence presented in the reports, although variable in terms of reliability, did not inform any strategic development at an institutional level. The lack of feedback to faculties on the FRRs, particularly in relation to the lack of reliability and validity of qualitative data, was a missed opportunity for quality improvement. Feedback would have ensured subsequent reports could be used strategically.

## **Use of evidence at faculty and departmental level**

How evidence was used at local levels varied both between faculties and between the departments within faculties. It was evident from the study that local contexts and organisational behaviours were highly influential at these levels and affected how evidence was used or not used.

Where the faculty retention reports included contributions from Head of Departments and a 'sign off' by the Dean there was greater use of the reports at departmental and course level (figure 6.1). Collegial organisational behaviours encouraged staff involvement, participation and awareness and these were key mechanisms in ensuring actions resulted from the evidence presented in the reports. However, there was a greater opportunity, particularly at departmental level, to block mechanisms which would otherwise have contributed to the successful implementation of an initiative. This was evident in the case of Department 2 (figure 6.2) where the HOD employed political behaviours, controlling information in a subjective organisational context, leading to a lack of awareness and involvement at course level and resulting in little or no action.

However, that evidence was explicit was not sufficient to ensure its use to inform future strategic direction. Reports from the peer-mentoring scheme, submitted to senior managers at institutional level, were neither utilised nor disseminated further to faculties or departments. Where this evidence was used strategically at departmental level, it was by Heads of Department who saw value in the scheme and considered course level and cohort mentoring. In these few cases, the scheme coordinator, on a one to one basis initiated this activity with the HOD.

Where the evidence was informal and anecdotal, identified above as the second type of evidence, it was far less likely to be used at either faculty or departmental levels. Evidence from the actions of Retention Tutors was unacknowledged at faculty level, with only one exception, faculty A. Here there were faculty level structures and communication channels, which facilitated the exchange and dissemination of information, which subsequently led to the development of new initiatives across the faculty. The visible support from the Dean was important in terms of recognition and encouraged participation by HODs and academic staff.

Where recognition and support was not in place at faculty level from either the Dean or Administrative Head, evidence from Retention Tutor activity was not disseminated throughout the faculty. This was most evident in faculty B, where although there was a structure in terms of retention meetings there was little participation by HODs or academic staff. The utilisation of evidence was wholly dependant upon the Retention Tutors' ability to disseminate and champion their activity locally to individuals and HODs. Here again contextual factors and behaviours became highly influential in determining the extent to which evidence was used, with Heads of Department choosing whether or not they wished to engage, even at the level of initial discussions. This had an impact on morale with some Retention Tutors questioning why the role was created in the first place. It was especially difficult for the evidence to be used in any way, which could be termed strategic. Interestingly, this was the one initiative not evidenced by at least some quantitative data. The lack of explicit evidence, particularly quantitative data in relation to the Retention Tutor initiative, appears to have related to lack of recognition at faculty and departmental level.



By comparison, Student Officers could demonstrate the numbers of students they supported through individual appointments and electronic communication. Additionally, they provided a conduit for student feedback on a range of issues of interest to faculty and departmental academic managers. This was valued as the student experience was emerging as a key agenda in higher education, which may have been a contributory factor in how the role was supported by academic and administrative managers.

In addition to explicit quantitative data, much evidence of their activity was also anecdotal. This was channelled through dialogue with the administrative heads, their line managers, as well as conversations with Deans and HODs in much the same way as Retention Tutors. In contrast, this evidence was utilised strategically and the scope of the role and activity of the initiative grew considerably over the three-year period. Here the key mechanism for success was internal management support from the administrative heads and to a lesser extent Deans.

### **Intra – institutional use of evidence**

In this context, evidence was not used to inform strategic developments in a formal manner. Instead, groups and individuals used evidence in a way that was crucial to the development of some initiatives, without which they would not have had the impact they had on student engagement and retention. Key individuals who acted as champions for the retention initiatives used evidence strategically through informal intra-institutional networks and groups. Three of the four initiatives included as part of this study, Peer Mentoring, Student Officers and Retention Tutors, developed their activity using these mechanisms.

Acting as champions, individuals disseminated evidence of their activity through the institution. This was not purely self-promotional but also developmental in looking for ways in which the initiative could be more successful or improved. As a result, individuals gathered support from colleagues, which in turn prompted further development of the initiative. Although this was not a formal use of evidence, it was highly effective in developing the initiatives over the three years, so they would have an impact.

The methodology used in this study indicated that certain contexts were conducive to this informal intra-institutional use of evidence. That the university was a large and complex institution appears to have been beneficial in this respect, in that it created a favourable environment for participatory informal networks to develop. These networks were key mechanisms for the dissemination of activity and information. Whereas some were semi-structured, such as the team working activity of the SOs or the retention forum, others were spontaneous and adaptable dependent upon the individuals concerned and their needs. An example is the promotion of the mentoring scheme by SOs on behalf of the scheme coordinator.

<b>To what extent does how the evidence is used demonstrate an impact on student retention?</b>
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This study did not set out to identify the causes of student attrition. As discussed in the literature review, research into student retention in the UK and US over many years acknowledges the complexity of this issue, and that no one programme or initiative can provide a solution (Yorke, 1999, Nutt, 2005). The need for a multi-faceted approach, which might influence different student

groups in a variety of ways was important and this is what the strategy aimed to achieve. However, there was considerable research to indicate that student engagement, socially and academically is important, as initially proposed by Tinto in his interactionalist model (1973) and further developed by the work of subsequent researchers into this area (Astin, 1984, Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980, Kuh et al, 2004, Yorke and Longden, 2007). These features were implicit to most of the strategy initiatives.

Based on research evidence, each of the initiatives introduced as part of the strategy were likely to have a positive impact on student retention and engagement. What this study intended to establish was the extent to which they were able to be effective in making that impact. Within the context of an evidence-based approach, this translates into how the implementation of the strategy bridged the gap between policy and practice. Here again my initial model (figure 4.2) of how evidence was used and its impact on retention, or otherwise was simplistic.

Acknowledging that evidence was used in different ways as identified in relation to the second research question, my conclusion from this study is that how it was used and within which contexts related to the effectiveness of the initiatives in impacting on student retention. This was illustrated by the use of the retention reports and data. Where the Heads of Departments 1 and 3 had engaged with the retention reports and used them with course teams they acknowledged some successes, such as improvements in attendance monitoring and peer mentoring. Although these were not always easy to quantify in terms of meeting retention targets, there had been some improvements. There was some



disillusion from HODs that the only 'evidence' valued by senior management was an improvement in retention statistics, which could take some time. Evidence of other benefits, such as engagement through improved attendance remained unrecognised.

However, within the formal organisational structure of the university, much evidence was as likely to be ignored as it was to be used. In these contexts, the initiatives had little or no impact on student retention and engagement. An example of this was the use of the FRRs by HOD 2 and the Retention Tutors initiative in some faculties and departments. Here it was possible to identify a number of blocking mechanisms, which prevented the implementation of initiatives. These included ambiguity around roles, particularly line management responsibilities in the case of Retention Tutors. Also, control of information and access, which restricted communication and dissemination. Frequently these were the actions of one individual in a key academic or administrative position, which were able to have a profound effect on the impact of an initiative.

Where evidence was used informally and yet still strategically, initiatives appeared to expand across the university and engaged increasing numbers of students, this is particularly so where peer mentoring was concerned where the growth in numbers of mentors and mentees alone indicated a high level of student engagement with the institution. Here there was a clear impact on student retention through increased engagement. Similarly, the SO initiative grew over the three years to provide support and engage students through a number of activities. Much of the engagement took the form of voluntary activities and fundraising, creating social communities and student groups.

They also provide a channel of communication for students in addition to the academic and personal tutor systems. I would conclude here that this evidence from these initiatives demonstrated a clear impact on student engagement and subsequently retention

## **11.2 Conclusions from a Realistic Evaluation**

### **Middle range theory and cumulation**

The evaluation of each of the four retention initiatives produced a number of CMO configurations specific to the success or otherwise of that particular initiative. In addition, the data analysis identified a number of CMO configurations derived from the networking activities of participants, which had a positive impact on the development of retention activity within the institution. As discussed in the methodology section, I had purposefully identified contexts within an institution behavioural framework (Berger, 2002, Bolman and Deal, 1991) or as a management model (Bush, 1995). This was necessary in order to explore relationships between organisational behaviours, integration and retention which formed part of the theoretical framework for the research. As the analysis progressed, it was possible to identify contexts more closely related to complex organisational behaviour (McMillan, 2008, Stacey, 2001) and understand how mechanisms within these contexts produced a range of outcomes. These contexts were not anticipated at the start of the research but are key to understanding why certain initiatives developed successfully with little apparent engagement or support from management. As contexts, these related to current thinking on organisational behaviour, knowledge management and organisational learning as opposed to the traditional management models initially identified at the outset of this research.

To draw conclusions from the range of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes identified in the data analysis and referred to in the conclusions to each of the three research questions it was necessary to discuss Pawson and Tilley's (1997) concept of realist cumulation from specification to theory. As outlined in the methodology (chapter 5) in realistic evaluation *programme specification* or CMO configurations are argued as more relevant research goals than generalization (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). The CMO configurations were specific to the individual areas of research, in each case developed through evaluation of the separate initiatives. As research progresses, Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that understanding of CMO configurations becomes more 'focused, deeper and formalised' and it becomes possible to develop and subsequently further explore hypotheses. This developing understanding enables the production of '*middle range theory*'

'Cumulation in evaluation research is thus about producing *middle-range theory*, of a kind abstract enough to underpin the development of a range of program types yet concrete enough to withstand testing in the details of programme implementation'

(Pawson and Tilley 1997, p116)

Whereas from a purely positivist paradigm 'theory' is something which can be tested, replicated, operationalised and applied universally (Cohen *et al.* 2000) in realistic evaluation this is considered unachievable due to the constantly changing contextual nature of environment and participants. Likewise, in relation to generalization, Guba and Lincoln (1989) quoted in Pawson and Tilley



(1997, p22) state that 'all situations are unique and problems and solutions cannot be generalised from one context to another'.

This was particularly relevant in terms of the evaluation of the Retention Strategy, located in a large institution and comprising complex programme of initiatives with numerous participants. The replication of the initiatives would be possible but the contexts within which they were located, the behaviours and motivations of individuals and nature of support would be impossible to control or predict.

However, having identified specific initiatives for the study, which reflect the range of activity across the university, the research identified sufficient CMO configurations from which it was possible to develop some middle-range theory and draw reliable conclusions. These are discussed below and have implications for educational leadership and management and evidence-based practice.

Pawson (2006) describes mechanisms as the 'engines of explanation' in realist analysis. The mechanisms are those things which make the system work, in other words create successful outcomes. A mechanism will work within certain contexts, but if the context changes this can become a blocking mechanism rather than enabling. This study has identified a number of mechanisms, which were key to the successful implementation of the retention strategy initiatives, and the contexts required for successful outcomes. In addition, the outcomes indicate a number of contexts and mechanisms which were prohibitive.

### **Mechanisms within a formal organisational context**

Retention initiatives were located within faculties, departments or central units within the university's formal organisational model. There was a clear hierarchy through which change was intended to take place and an assumed rational approach to achieving goals through academic and administrative structures. This context reflected a formal management model (Bush, 1995), with bureaucratic behaviours and is commensurate with a rationalist teleology of knowledge creation (Stacey, 2001). Within this context, there were three key mechanisms which led to positive outcomes, *communication*, *participation* and *engagement*.

The communication of information between levels of the organisation was crucial to the success of the initiatives. This was true for all four initiatives studied as part of this research. Where clear communication took place there was increased awareness and a strong likelihood changes were initiated as a result. However, it was also a blocking mechanism when communication either did not take place or was ineffective. This occurred where the context had changed and different management models operated at local levels, in particular political or subjective models and associated behaviours. This led to the control of information and lack of transparency.

*Participation* in and *engagement* with activities and processes by key academic staff were important mechanisms within a formal context. Where this occurred at either faculty, departmental or course levels there was increased ownership of the retention issue and the introduction of interventions, leading to improvements in retention and student engagement. Again, where the context

was different these mechanisms were not effective and connections to change practice were absent.

These findings broadly concur with research evidence linking organisational behaviours to retention, (Berger, 2002 table 3.1). Where bureaucratic behaviours are prevalent there both positive and negative outcomes.

### **Mechanisms within a collegial organisational context**

A collegial model was identified at local, departmental levels and intra-institutionally in each of the four initiatives. Where behaviours associated with this model were prevalent the mechanisms, *communication*, *participation* and *engagement* all produced positive outcomes. In addition, two further mechanisms, *accessibility* and *support* had a strong impact within this context, examples range from support students gained from mentoring to the accessibility of Student Officers.

Where most of these five mechanisms were in operation an initiative, such as the Peer Mentoring or Student Officers developed rapidly and made a significant difference. As a context, a collegial model was conducive to development and did not appear to block mechanisms, which again concurs with Berger's work on organisational behaviours (Berger, 2002 table 3.1).

The developments of lateral networks within an institution (Bush, 1995) are also commensurate with collegial behaviours and this was evident within the institution where intra-institutional *networks* evolved. These were a key



mechanism in terms of the success of a number of initiatives and are discussed more fully within the context of complex organisational models.

### **Mechanisms within complex organisational contexts**

My initial review of literature related to organisational behaviour and retention identified the work of Braxton and Brier (1989) Berger (2002), Bolman, and Deal (1991) as relevant to this study. The categories of organisational behaviours were identified as bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and systemic (Berger, 2002 table 3.1). These behaviours were associated with a number of organisational management models, in particular formal, collegial, political, ambiguous and subjective (Bush, 1995). In addition to the mechanisms discovered above, the data analysis identified further mechanisms that were effective yet required different organisational contexts. These mechanisms included *self-identified champions*, *informal institutional networks* and *self-initiated actions*. Whereas lateral networks are commensurate with a collegial model and behaviours, I considered this did not fully explain the phenomena emerging from the data analysis. These mechanisms were crucial to the implementation and development of three initiatives; Mentoring, Student Officers and Retention Tutors, and were particularly important where formal, political and subjective organisational models and behaviours blocked mechanisms identified earlier.

The ability of individuals working across the institution to self-organize into networks and communities with a common purpose is indicative of a complex adaptive system (McMillan, 2008). Over a period, this activity developed and was mutually beneficial to those involved in that it enabled them to achieve their

individual and collective goals in implementing initiatives and activity to address retention and improve student engagement. Importantly, it was not only the ability to self-organize and self-initiate but also the opportunity. I would conclude these opportunities arose because this was a large institution, where the formal model was unsustainable leading to different contexts at local levels and intra – institutionally. Likewise the emergence of *self-identified champions*, a role that could not be sustained without the freedom to move throughout the institution at different levels.

The introduction of mechanisms identified in relation to formal and collegial models, namely *communication, participation, engagement, accessibility* and *support* are also evident within this context, contributing to the effective development of initiatives. The findings from this research indicate that this context was the most conducive to the effective implementation of the retention strategy as it enabled the introduction of the mechanisms most likely to effect positive change. The cumulative findings from a realist approach to evaluation indicate this forms the basis of middle-range theory.

‘Cumulative knowledge about the whos, wheres and whyfores of programme success is not tied to the paraphernalia of each initiative but occurs through a process of abstraction. Realist synthesis thus ends up with theory’

(Pawson, 2002 p349)

Whereas the contexts and mechanisms identified here were the findings of a realistic evaluation of a retention strategy, they contribute to theory on

organisational development and have implications for leadership and management in higher education in a broader context. A different approach, which encompasses a greater understanding of complexity theory within an organisational context, would lead to different processes in implementing and evaluating strategy.

### **11.3 The implications for Evidence-based Practice**

The nature of evidence available and extent to which different forms of evidence were formally recognised is summarised earlier in this section. I conclude that evidence recognised at senior levels in the institution was explicit and quantitative and much of the available evidence remained unacknowledged particularly, where it was anecdotal and informal. Although this is an institutional study, Locke (2009) indicates this is concurrent with the experience of many researchers into the policy-practice nexus, in that there is a preference for positivist methodologies and 'hard' data, which is quantitative rather than qualitative.

However, in taking a realist approach to this study identifying mechanisms and contexts, which were likely to affect positive outcomes, I conclude that much of the evidence that was valid was by nature informal and anecdotal such as dialogue, networks and informal documentation. A reliance on formally recognised evidence in the form of data and reports would have failed to identify *self-identified champions, informal institutional networks* and *self-initiated actions* as mechanisms and the complex organisational context as conducive to positive outcomes.



Through this research, it was possible to develop a deeper understanding of why these forms of evidence are equally important to that, which is explicit. Implicit forms of evidence constitute forms of knowledge within the institution, which were previously held in tacit form. This knowledge becomes explicit as it is shared by groups and individuals through those mechanisms identified earlier. These are examples of double-loop learning or mental model 2 (Argyris and Schon, 1978) and a formative teleology of knowledge creation (Stacy, 2001). Through this study, I have demonstrated that the emergence of much knowledge of effective practice in implementing and developing the retention initiatives was evidenced through informal and anecdotal methods. The findings of this research contribute to the continuing debate on evidence-based practice and add to the argument that an 'organisational learning model' (Borden, 2004) ought to comprise a rich evidence base generated from a multi-method approach.

I have demonstrated how certain types of evidence are acknowledged at senior levels within an institution, yet evidence that illustrates impact is often not used because of nature of that evidence. The literature, which advocated the use of a wide range of evidence (Jackson 2004, Borden, 2004) focussed on debates around the *research-policy-practice* nexus whereas this study translated these debates into practice within the context of higher education management. Through identifying types of evidence, how it is used or otherwise this study contributes to knowledge and understanding of how evidence-based practice ought to be articulated within a complex educational organisational environment and contributes to existing literature in the field. I have also demonstrated that acknowledgement, by an institution of different types of evidence is critical to

organisational learning and knowledge creation, arguably a fundamental goal for senior and middle managers in higher education.

The application of a realistic evaluation methodology identified new relationships between generative mechanisms, contexts and outcomes, which help us to understand the complex yet concrete world in which we operate. This is new knowledge and understanding within the focus of this study, namely the evaluation of a retention strategy within a large university. The mechanisms identified resulted from a depth analysis of the strategy. Within realistic evaluation it was possible to apply theory at multiple-levels (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) whereby the interventions themselves, such as Peer Mentoring and Student Officers were considered as mechanisms. This was the obvious starting point for the study. However, I argue this would have led to findings which lacked the specificity of the final research. My approach has identified a number of new, previously unrecognised, mechanisms and contexts, which are conducive to change in an organisational setting and inform theory and practice in education management and leadership. Although identified through the evaluation of a retention strategy these mechanisms and contexts have relevance for strategy implementation within the broader context in that they are not confined to retention related activity, per se.

This study contributes to knowledge of organisational management models in higher education. A complex organisational context proved conducive for many of the mechanisms identified and it was within this context that interventions developed and had impact. Much of the literature focuses on the use of complexity theory to understand organisations, rather than what a complex

organisation model might look like. This study identifies some features prevalent in what I would term a complex educational organisational model, particularly the opportunity for networking, emergent activity and self-organisation. I conclude a university that utilises this model in some areas of activity could progress change programmes more effectively.

Previous research into the relationship between retention and characteristics of organisational behaviour was discussed in the literature review (Braxton and Brier, 1989, Berger and Braxton, 1998). The research was quantitative, based on large - scale surveys. Through a qualitative approach, this study contributes to knowledge on the relationship between organisational behaviour and retention, by identifying a number of characteristics, in the form of mechanisms, which are conducive or otherwise.

#### **11.4 Reflections on the Limitations of the Study**

I consider there to be several limitations to this research study. Firstly, the range of retention initiatives and the institution itself required I make decisions about the scope of this study given the limitations of a time bound study. In selecting the initiatives, I sought to include a wide a variety as possible and considered the nature and location of the initiative within the institution. Inevitably, had I chosen different initiatives there may have been different outcomes, indicating that there is the opportunity for further research in this area. That a complex context was conducive to the effective introduction of certain mechanisms may have been because of the size of the institution. A study located in a smaller institution where a formal organisational mode is potentially more prevalent, would prove a useful comparative study.



Secondly, having identified the initiatives, some of which had been in situ a number of years it became apparent that there was a wealth of material, particularly documentary. I had to be purposive in selecting individuals for interview informed by a realist approach to interviews (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This study then reflects research undertaken at a specific point in time into a selected group of individuals and their practice. It has successfully identified a number of organisational contexts within which some mechanisms or interventions may be effective or otherwise. It recognises that these interventions are embedded in multiple social systems and the conclusions of the study are not finite.

### **11.5 Recommendations**

Recommendations made from this study, relate to organisational development, educational leadership, management, student retention and engagement. I am no longer working at the institution where this study was located and consequently not in a position to make recommendations to individuals. However, I have indicated the level of the organisation where each recommendation is directed and the appropriate role, for example Dean, Head of Department, Student Services. The recommendations are discussed below and summarised in table 11.1

There is the need for *greater recognition of the range of organisational behaviours and management models that exist at local levels*. Universities may be loosely coupled organisations comprising central departments, academic faculties and departments, within a formal structure, however, the assumption that this formal structure exists at all levels and that initiatives will be

implemented in a linear and rational manner is overly simplistic. As this study has found such an assumption inhibited strategy implementation in practice. A recommendation would be *the introduction of multi-level teamworking to implement initiatives*, encouraging participation and ownership and facilitate knowledge creation.

A need for greater *understanding of how knowledge is created and transferred within a complex environment* would facilitate strategy implementation and produce successful outcomes. This would create an environment where 'champions' for specific initiatives are identified and receive the appropriate support to progress initiatives. Concurrent with this is the need for a quality enhancement, rather than quality assurance approach to the monitoring and evaluation of initiatives, in order to ascertain where meaningful change occurs. A recommendation is to *recognise existing complex educational organisation models where they occur within the institution and create the appropriate environment for the development of similar models, particularly intra – institutional networks*. This requires the introduction of management processes whereby evidence, in its many forms from activity is acknowledged and utilised through dissemination.

A further recommendation in relation to the above points is *wider dissemination of evidence within the university*. Reports and data, widely disseminated would raise awareness about initiatives and encourage increased participation. This necessitates a senior management lead to improved transparency through dissemination across the university and throughout management levels, leading to greater ownership.

Organisational models and behaviours have been identified, which affect student retention and engagement. Whereas universities already articulate their values through mission statements and university strategy, it is through institutional behaviours that these are enacted and experienced by staff and students. *A clear communication strategy led by senior managers designed to address less appropriate behaviours and contexts, would result in the successful implementation of interventions to address attrition.*

*A focus on institutional research that seeks to explain phenomena rather than validate policy or strategy is recommended.* Such a focus would develop an informed evidence-base for development of future strategy. It would also encourage a greater understanding of knowledge creation within the university to inform organisational development within a broader context.

Specific actions in relation to the above recommendations are summarised below

**Table 11.1 Summary of recommendations and actions**

Action by	Recommendation
Vice-Chancellor and SMT Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review university value statements to include expectations in relation to organisational behaviour.</li><li>• Guidelines for staff and students articulating appropriate behaviour.</li></ul>
PVC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establish clear line management responsibility for faculty based posts and monitor through meetings with SOs and Retention Tutors</li></ul>
PVC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lead on the creation of intra-institutional networks.</li><li>• Support existing networks by meeting with project</li></ul>



	<p>coordinators on a regular basis, hence identifying and supporting champions and developing awareness of knowledge creation within the institution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify communities of practice through closer involvement with key individuals and coordinators.</li> </ul>
PVC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve dissemination of project reports from Student Officers, Retention Tutors and Peer Mentoring to different levels within the institution.</li> <li>• Provide feedback on FRRs and reports from initiatives.</li> <li>• Discuss retention targets with Deans and HODs, consider discipline benchmarks as well as institutional targets.</li> </ul>
Deans (led by PVC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish senior academic leads (Deans) to act as mentors and additional champions for centrally located retention initiatives. Ensure formal and informal communicative processes within the organisation are established and open.</li> <li>• Identify communities of practice through closer involvement with key individuals and coordinators.</li> </ul>
Deans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish multi-level teamwork activity across faculties between HODs and academic staff from different departments to remove barriers, encourage cooperation, share good practice and gain understanding of local contexts.</li> <li>• In each Faculty, establish a Course Leaders forum to bring together staff from different departments to meet and collaborate to support retention initiatives. Include retention project champions / coordinators to encourage activity at level close to student body.</li> </ul>
HODs (led by Dean)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share good management practice in addressing retention by acting as mentors to other HODs</li> </ul>
Strategic Research unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review internal staff survey to capture feedback on organisational behaviours, contexts and mechanisms identified by this study.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establish framework and methodology for reports</li><li>• Establish mechanism for regular reflective internal evaluation of activity, meetings of key individuals every two months.</li><li>• Wide distribution of reports and findings</li></ul>
ADU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Publicise key points from reports to all staff through web bulletins and newsletters.</li></ul>

**11.6 Implications for Professional Practice**

This research focussed on the implementation of a retention strategy, developed using an evidence-based approach to student retention. The methodology, using a realistic evaluation led to a number of conclusions in response to the research questions and a series of recommendations. These were relevant to the university, in which the research was located, but also have implications for the development of professional practice within a wider context.

All higher education institutions have programmes through which they effect institutional change, be this in response to internal or external drivers. In this particular university, institutional change was managed through a number of strategies, usually time-bound and *in situ* until the necessary changes to practice were achieved. Other institutions may adopt change management projects or business improvement processes. However, the intentions are similar, designed move the organisation from one place to another in respect of a specific aspect of activity. In this respect, the outcomes of this research have wider implications for those responsible for developing and managing change programmes.

Whereas, at strategy inception, consideration had been given to the type of intervention likely to improve student retention and these initiatives are located in research evidence from that time, there appeared to be less understanding of the environment, particularly its complexity and the role of the individual in the implementation of the strategy. There appears to have been an assumption by senior managers that middle managers would be facilitative and supportive, possibly through assumed compliance, their 'buy in' to the mission and values of the university or because this was assumed to be encompassed in their management role. There appeared to be some naivety, which for me, questions concepts of academic management in higher education. In relation to professional practice, there is a requirement for greater recognition of the need for ownership, responsibility and engagement by academic managers at different levels in supporting both the processes for change and those practitioners engaged to effect change. In practice, this is achievable through improving communication within the institution, described earlier as opening channels of communication, which would enable practitioners to a 'voice' at different levels within the organisation.

Increased engagement by academic managers would also facilitate a 'bottom-up' approach to managing and effecting change. As this research identifies, valuable professional learning occurred at a local or intra – institutional level through networks and shared experiences. This would involve a pro-active approach by managers to maintain visibility and accessibility within departments and faculties. From an institutional perspective, this remained largely at the level where it was located, yet has considerable potential to inform future institutional developments.



In terms of developing professional practice, the above have implications within a wider context beyond student retention strategies, the subject focus of this research. These issues are transferable to a range of higher education management contexts and have implications for the further development academic leadership and management and institutional research.

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## 13. Appendices

### Appendix 1. Summary of Retention Strategy Initiatives and Projects

#### **Data Officers and data reporting**

Student Service in conjunction with Faculty Data Officers agreed data definitions and specified standard retention reports. The first report was produced in November 2005, indicating retention and progression for the previous year. An interim retention report was produced in January 2006.

A withdrawal profile is also produced identifying withdrawal by mode, level, age, gender, ethnicity and disability

Faculty Data Officers (DOs) are able to produce regular reports for faculty teams on student withdrawal.

The DOs have also contributed to the specification and standardisation of a range of reports within the institution. As a group they have been able to combine expertise and provide support across Faculties. The data provided by the DOs is utilised at faculty level to inform planning processes.

Faculties produced thorough Retention reports for SEC (February 2006). Institutional schedule for the production of withdrawal and progression reports and submission of Faculty Retention reports to Student Experience Committee (SEC)

#### **The One Stop Information Shop for students**

The one stop shop opened in September 2003. It has dealt with an increasing number of student enquiries year on year and is a valuable information point for students, particularly during the first semester. Number of student enquiries:

2003-4 Approximately 28,000

2004-5 51,578

#### **Peer Mentoring**

The Peer Mentoring scheme was established in 2003, recruiting students to voluntarily act as mentors to fellow students. The scheme has grown from 200 mentees in Phase 1, 2002-4 to 496 mentors and 1284 mentees in 2005-6. The strategy to promote the scheme at induction events and the Deans address in 2005 has been successful in raising awareness amongst staff and students. Retention Tutors and Student Officers (SOs) act as important contacts within Faculties encouraging student participation. However the strongest advocates are the students themselves, as demonstrated by the popularity of the scheme.

The scheme has close links with other retention projects and central initiatives. It has



<p>been introduced at Y this academic year and will be further developed by the SO in liaison with the Mentoring team at X</p> <p>The Mentoring team is working with the Faculty B over the summer period piloting a E-mentoring. This is aimed at supporting first year students with a mentor prior to entry and during their first few weeks.</p> <p><i>Establishing a mentoring scheme in all departments has not been actioned. Although the mentoring team is increasingly working at Departmental level on 'in programme' mentoring initiatives. There has been some growth in this activity from 12 mentors and 40 mentees in 2004-5 to 117 mentors and 413 mentees in 2005-6.</i></p>						
<p><b>Pre - Entry Summer School Scheme</b></p> <p>The Pre - Entry Summer School Scheme was established in 1999. It has been successful in supporting students at transition in to HE. The scheme initially devised for GNVQ students has expanded and is offer to all students who have confirmed acceptances. In 2005 there were 4 summer schools, (one following clearing) accommodating 1000 students. A further Summer School was held at Y, (subsequently discontinued)</p> <p>Research outcomes indicate:</p> <p>A high conversion rate</p> <p>Significant Summer School students engaging with X as student representatives / mentors</p> <p>Significant number of students achieving firsts and upper second class awards</p>						
<p><b>Academic Study Skills (ASS)</b></p> <p>ASS was established in 2003-4 and has supported increasing numbers of students year on year. The unit offers workshops and 1:1 tutorials on a range of study skills topics and is used both for remedial support and the further enhancement of skills, (essay/report writing, dissertations, problem solving, grammar revision, exam revision).</p> <p>Students accessing ASS :</p> <table><tr><td>2003-4</td><td>1:1 Tutorials : 237</td><td>Workshops 684</td></tr><tr><td>2005-6</td><td>1:1Tutorials : 543</td><td>Workshops 993</td></tr></table> <p>The unit offers support over the summer for students with reassessments, but is used equally the Faculty D where programmes run throughout this period.</p> <p>There has been some work with individual programme cohorts and a small move towards supporting staff in embedding study skills in L&amp;T, both activities are by request. The scheme is popular with students and its growth likely to continue as tutors</p>	2003-4	1:1 Tutorials : 237	Workshops 684	2005-6	1:1Tutorials : 543	Workshops 993
2003-4	1:1 Tutorials : 237	Workshops 684				
2005-6	1:1Tutorials : 543	Workshops 993				

<p>become increasingly aware. It is promoted at induction events, Deans address and by Retention Tutors and SOs</p> <p>Recommendations;</p> <p>ASS was established as an academic support unit and has had considerable success. However, the issues around 'support' and 'remedial' activity are likely to deter some students from using the service. To some extent, this is reflected in the report, which acknowledges that some students use ASS to raise achievement in higher grade bands.</p>
<p><i>Administrative support for retention to be improved</i></p>
<p>0.5 attendance monitor (AM) posts at Faculty level. Attendance monitors undertake a variety of activities depending upon the processes within departments and faculties. The existing provision supports some AM activity, but not AM of all students on all courses at all levels. This level of AM would involve far greater administrative support. Where academic tutors are closely involved and input data directly AM could be implemented across more realistically.</p>
<p><b>Faculty Retention Tutors</b></p>
<p>Retention Tutor roles have been different in each Faculty.</p> <p>Faculty B : 1 FT SL post from 2003-4</p> <p>Faculty D: 0.5 post Retention (+ 0.5 LTC) plus FT Student Support Officer from 2003-4</p> <p>Faculty C: Departmental Progress Coordinators from 2005-6</p> <p>Faculty A: 1 FT SL post from 2005-6 ( previously fractional post 0.25)</p> <p>The activities undertaken have varied depending upon the Faculty and the individual Retention Tutor as the attached report indicates. Retention Tutors have done a considerable amount of work, despite some lack of clarity over the role in some cases.</p> <p>Retention Tutor report</p>
<p><b>Reintroduction to HE scheme - Student Re-Start</b></p>
<p>The scheme reintroduced 130 students in 2004 -5 and 366 students in 2005-6 expanding the scheme contacting all full and part time non returners. During 2005-6 the scheme contacted all first year undergraduate non returners (850) with an anticipated 60 students due to return in September 2006, a conversion rate of 7%. The target for 2006-7 was 50 students.</p>
<p><b>Summer and Winter Support Schemes</b></p>



<p>The Summer Support Scheme has been in place for the last two years. It is coordinated in Faculties by Retention Tutors and Student Officers (Faculty D by the Student Support Officer). Central initiatives ASS, Peer Mentoring, Student Re-Start are also involved along with Central Services (LLRS, Student Services, The one-stop-shop). Review of 2005 programme indicated that Student Services and ASS were the most used. SSS Review</p>
<p><b>Student Organiser</b></p>
<p>The Student Organiser is being produced for the third year. Following a successful pilot in the Faculty C (2005-6), this year it will be distributed to second and third year students as well as first years. First year students will also receive an information booklet as part of their organiser pack.</p>
<p><b>Fresher's Questionnaire</b></p>
<p>The questionnaire was carried out in both October 2003,4 and 2005 during weeks 6,7 and 8 of Semester 1. The questionnaire provides useful information and feedback on retention and induction initiatives. Data and feedback is also used for planning purposes by Central Induction Planning Party.</p>
<p><b>Parents for Progression</b></p>
<p>The project started with a pilot in 2004-5, contacting parents of students with a confirmed place at X. The second phase of the project has funded two events for this year.</p>
<p><b>Student Officers (SOs)</b></p>
<p>Student Officers have been full time appointments in four faculties. In the Faculty D SOs were departmental appointments supporting the Student Advice Centre 4hrs/ week.</p> <p>In the faculties where there have been full time SOs their contribution to work around retention has been considerable and this is acknowledged by Retention Tutors, Retention Project Leaders (Peer Mentoring, ASS) and Heads of Administration. Additionally the SOs have worked together to develop the role and range of activities in which they are involved, beyond their initial student advice role. Importantly they provide feedback on students' views at faculty and institutional levels. SO report</p>
<p><b>Mature Students Society</b></p>
<p>Introduced in 2004-5, this forum provides support in a social environment for mature</p>



students on entry to HE. It is based around theories of student engagement and communities, bringing together students in similar circumstances at the time they need most support. The trend appears to be that by the end of Semester 1 students are beginning to locate themselves within discipline areas and have less need of the society. The Mature Students Society website will launch in September 2006 as a means of providing information and further support. A pilot induction event for mature students entering year 1 is planned for 'welcome weekend', with 71 confirmed acceptances (6.9.06)

#### **Postgraduate Students Induction Events**

Piloting two x one-day induction events for 2006 entry postgraduate students, (June and September). Similarly based on supporting distinct students groups; the events provide opportunities for networking, socialising and relationship building. There are inputs from Peer Mentoring, Library Resources and Student Services and a presentation on 'studying at postgraduate level'.

#### **Partner College Retention Projects**

Partner Colleges have had the opportunity to bid for funds of up to £5000 to undertake projects to improve retention. The scheme has run for two years with six projects funded in each year.

The projects vary in nature and in meeting their aims and objectives. The more successful projects were clearly targeted and effectively evaluated. In these cases, funding has contributed to institutional initiatives and helped secure successful outcomes, measured by improvements in retention.

## **Appendix 2. Template for Faculty Retention Reports**

Methodology

Executive Summary

Section 1: Overall Faculty Position

1.1 Introduction

1.2 HEFCE, Year 1 and Year 0 ( Full Time & Sandwich, Home & European, Undergraduates)

1.3 Overseas and Island

1.4 Undergraduate

1.4.1 Full Time Undergraduate (Home and European)

1.4.2 Part Time

1.5 Postgraduate Taught

1.6 Comparison with previous year

Section 2: Departmental

Statistics by department with analysis

Section 3: Partner Colleges

Section 4: Overseas Partner Colleges

Section 5: Retention Initiatives and Progress

5.1 Faculty level

5.2 Departmental level

### Appendix 3. Document Analysis of Faculty Retention Reports 2004-5

Theme	Faculty A	Faculty B	Faculty C	Faculty D
1.Report author (s)	Data Officer Interviewed HODs Ran data report	Head of Admin Data Officers Retention Tutor 2 HOD's	2 Data Officers 1 HOD	Data Officer Principal Officer (Academic) Retention Tutor
2.Authority	Dean of Faculty			Not stated
3.Purpose of report (as stated )	Highlight key information and illustrate initiatives to improve retention for 06/7	Summarise the progression and retention statistics for Faculty.		
4.Attrition Rate (F + WD)	12.96% on campus all years UG		15% on campus all years UG	11.55% on all students all years
5.Target 04-5	Not stated	Not stated	11%	Not stated
6.Subject matter	Overall faculty position with analysis of W, NR, IN, %pass/award %alt award, no rec given as percentages.  Departmental analysis by %age and actuals identifying programmes with <85% retention	Overall faculty position with analysis of W, NR, IN, %pass/award %alt award, no rec given as percentages.  Departmental analysis by %age. No actuals	Overall faculty position with analysis of W, NR, IN, %pass/award %alt award, no rec given as percentages.  Departmental analysis by %age. No actuals.	Overall faculty position with analysis of W, NR, IN, %pass/award %alt award, no rec given as percentages.  Departmental analysis by %age and actuals identifying programmes with <85% retention
7.Reasons for high attrition	Students do not have adequate skills / experience Students lack motivation Students have poor maths ability Overseas students poorly prepared A poor English	No reference to the reasons for high attrition at either departmental or course level.	High failure rates ay Yr1 & 2 Part time provision on certificate courses Distance learning certificate courses.	At risk courses demonstrate withdrawal of postgraduate students with conflicting work commitments. Financial issues Child care commitments Poor bursaries (midwifery) Personal issues (social work) Employability issues (sports



	<p>language ability</p> <p>Students recruited through clearing perform less well.</p> <p>Poor choice of course</p> <p>Financial issues</p> <p>Part time working</p> <p>Rapid expansion of programmes</p>			<p>therapy)</p> <p>All clearly defined issues and closely monitored.</p>
8.Actions taken 04-5	<p>Attendance monitoring pilot</p> <p>Mentoring (in course)</p> <p>Retention Tutor support for at risk students</p> <p>Emotional competency project</p> <p>Induction activity</p> <p>Personal tutoring</p> <p>Some curriculum development</p> <p>Transition support ( year 3)</p>	<p>Narrative on retention related activities which were undertaken such as personal tutoring, mentoring, attendance monitoring but no qualitative or quantitative analysis to assess impact on student retention.</p> <p>Separate action plan with actions to be taken. Only updated by computing not other 3 departments. Dept 3 was separately supported.</p>	<p>Has been further work to determine whether there are common issues amongst withdrawn students (Not specified). Attendance monitoring of key modules. Some small group tutorials</p> <p>Faculty mentoring scheme</p> <p>Informal mechanisms to provide a friendly environment. Some discussion at departmental level.</p>	<p>Engagement with Student Re- Start 'Winter Audit' of student satisfaction</p> <p>Individual course action plans for courses with attrition of more 5% and more than 25 students.</p> <p>Recording of reasons for withdrawal.</p> <p>Cross faculty group to review induction arrangements for 05/6</p>
9.Goals (for 05-6)	<p>Improved data capture on reasons for withdrawal.</p> <p>Improved attendance monitoring</p> <p>Improved personal tutoring systems</p> <p>Improved</p>	<p>None clearly specified, but some intentions are implied within the narrative:</p> <p>Personal Tutor training sessions to continue.</p> <p>Potential e-mentoring project</p>	<p>Appoint departmental retention coordinators to support students.</p> <p>Monthly data reports to FET</p> <p>Retention coordinators to provide monthly</p>	<p>Possible Faculty Pre-Start programme</p> <p>Coordinated induction arrangements</p>

	study skills support and diagnostic testing Improved language support (overseas) Attendance monitoring, extend pilot	targeted at course with low retention rates.  PT's available 3hrs a week on timetable (design)  Postgrad induction in one dept.	reports to Dean and Faculty T&L committee Support Peer Mentoring and Student Re-Start and Summer Support Further analysis of yr1&2 fails for patterns. Emotional Literacy in PDP (Psychology). Personal tutoring reviewed and PDP reviewed.	
10.Methods to achieve goals	Use of 'tracker' to monitor attendance Personal Tutor forum	None specified	Faculty level action plan with identified responsibilities at	Action plan but for data analysis only. Careful analysis of withdrawn students
11.Direction		Narrative entirely positive 'look at what we have done'  No reference to areas of underperformance. No reference to institutional targets  All based on %ages not actual figures presented throughout the report.	Comparison between departments and faculty – the departments fall in line with faculty averages (justification). All based on %ages not actual figures presented throughout the report.	Clear and comprehensive monitoring of student activity and withdrawals.  Not clear where report went
12.Voice	Institutional	Institutional and presented in best light.	Institutional Broad brush  Lacking in detail or specific issues at either departmental or course level	Institutional and detailed. Balanced report on +ve and -ve

**Appendix 4. Interview Schedule for Heads of Department**  
 Exploratory Interviews: Faculty Retention Reports

Context  
 What constitutes evidence on retention?  
 How it is used to inform future development?  
 What impact does it have?

Theme and key areas for discussion / questions	Non verbal responses
<b>Dissemination of FRR</b>  Where (SEC/ Faculty/ Departmental)?  How is it used by these groups?	
<b>Retention Initiatives and Actions</b>  What kind of initiatives are prompted at faculty level by FRR process?  What is prompted at departmental level?	
<b>Impact of Initiatives and Actions</b>  Do these actions/initiatives make a difference? To whom? How?	



<b>Student Experience</b>  How does the process affect students and how can this be evidenced?  Is there improved practice?	
<b>Strategic Direction</b>  How do you think reports are used institutionally?  How would you describe this process? (Formal, collaborative, consensus, political)	
<b>Improvements to Process?</b>  Other comments	

## Appendix 5. Extract from Analysis of Interviews with HODs

Theme	HOD 2	HOD 1
<p>Reliability of data/stats (Hod's opinion)</p> <p>REL/STA</p>	<p>. So even with the mechanisms they have in place, they are not absolutely robust. They have proved it by the very fact that they have taken how we did our in Faculty C and then transferred them in to how they are doing them in Faculty B and you will find that everybody now positively, on the whole, there might just be one case, but everybody's figures now moves up, so they are not a true record. So we could then argue that that puts the University in a more positive light and that is for the good</p>	<p>Faculty Data Officer, which has been very useful, and not least because if data has come from different sources, if you interpret it in different ways it becomes very difficult, its not just here, everywhere I have found that you come to do the QAA analysis trend series on it and you just can not get any other data to match, what ends one year doesn't start the next year, no explanation on why it is different, at least if there are still difficulties. L knows what going on and tracks that and if something doesn't make sense you can go back and its either an explanation you need or "oh right I have got that wrong" and its gets right, where as before it was like wading through treacle, about, you know, "where did this data come from, what were they?"</p> <p>The other thing about it, which we talked about last year, about the clean up of the data and based on things that D chose in a disadvantaged light, like double counting</p> <p>Yes, but partly, because it is actually quite difficult to make sense of that tracking and I think once L had done it for several years we haven't actually changed anything now, this is the tracking of what you did last year, this is what you did this year, if it is better then you are probably doing better, if it is worse then you are doing worse, where as now, you look at it and go "Ah well we look worse but I am sure we got a ...</p>
<p>How Hods perceive the data within faculty</p> <p>HP/FAC</p>		<p>... but when it comes to the actual figures you produce, we are not the worse, we are better than B M but not as good as J...</p>
<p>Staffs' perceptions</p>	<p>It doesn't have any meaning at all. Any time members of staff</p>	<p>It is really really easy to get overloaded trying to interpret</p>

of usefulness of data (based on HODs opinion)  SP/DEP	engage with it, they feel that they need or should engage with it there is an issue	these things because don't just get this data you get recruitment data, retention data and you get financial data and you get all this different kind of data coming through and you need to do a PhD in financial accounting to understand it but what tends to happen is that L produces the retention figures we get time series figures now reported to FET.
How are reports used institutionally  USE/INS	(to raise issues) Absolutely, this week we had an e-mail around, actually it was the end of last week, which identified from each department three modules that were not performing as good as they should.	



Appendix 6. Mentoring Scheme Document Analysis

Theme	Evidence	Year	Source
Aims	<b>The main aim of the Mentoring Programme is to improve retention of first year students at the university</b> Identify those factors which might be impacting negatively on students' experience at Univ Enable social interaction and help overcome isolation amongst students who are new to the Univ.	3/4	Report
Type of Evidence	Mentees referred on basis of non attendance and poor submission performance Effective referral systems developed with Retention Tutors in Comb Hons and 1 Faculty 90% respondents said mentoring had prevented them from dropping out All respondents stated they had developed better strategies for managing their time and workload and overcome issues 96% respondents feel confident moving into second year  86% mentees who indicated they had considered dropping out had changed their minds after working with a mentor 91% agreed working with a mentor helped them develop better time management strategies 95% were using action planning and PDP 97% felt working with a mentor would benefit them in the future All felt having a mentor had helped them settle in to univ  10 whole course mentoring pilots undertaken in departments with retention issues  13 whole course schemes undertaken 78% mentee respondents found scheme useful or very useful	3/4  4/5  5/6 6/7	Report Report Questionnaire Questionnaire Questionnaire  Report  Report Report SQ
Validity / Reliability	The Mentoring scheme established an appropriate evaluation methodology during the initial pilot phase. This methodology has involved utilising student volunteers to carry out questionnaires, focus group and individual interviews to provide a thorough and fair evaluation of progress 28% of mentors completed mid-term questionnaires 47% of mentees completed mid-term questionnaires  Used evaluation questionnaires from the Bournemouth PALs scheme FDTL project  36% response to questionnaire	4/5  5/6 6/7	Report  Report  Report Report
Mentee issues	Number of mentees failed to achieve required entry quals for chosen course and offered Comb Hons in subjects not of their own choices – lack motivation Most mentees had issues with time management – perceived HE study would be easy, by the time they were	3/4	Report Report





	<p>Presentations about the scheme at Personal Tutor awareness days</p> <p>Excellent progress has been made in the current phase through effective networking, further communication could only build on this positive start.</p> <p>Retention tutors are working actively with Personal Tutors to promote the scheme</p> <p>Whilst good referral systems have been developed with RTs these are more successful in faculties, where there is focussed support for the project. Similarly recruitment of mentors is better where SOs are full time positions</p> <p>Retention Tutor and SO identified xxx as having an issue with retention. mentoring coordinator liaised with academic staff to support mentoring within a year long module.</p> <p>Share mentors with Centre for Volunteering, Pre-entry Scheme, Student Associates Scheme</p>	<p>5/6</p> <p>6/7</p>	<p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p>
Status	<p>The mentoring programme has achieved a permanent base in 'the i'</p> <p>Knowledge of the programme amongst academic staff could be improved</p> <p>The programme team needs to further good work achieved by marketing the scheme to staff at all levels. Despite persistent networking, many colleagues and students remain unaware of the value of the programme. The Coordinator would welcome senior management acknowledgement and any recommendations of opportunities to present findings to colleagues</p> <p>Recommendation: A structured information and promotion strategy for academic staff at all levels should be established as a matter of priority.</p> <p>Targeted marketing of the scheme has taken place during the Deans' address in freshers week</p> <p>Recommendations: Role of RT and SO formally defined to include support and liaison with the mentoring scheme – targeted recruitment of mentors at faculty level and targeted promotion to key academic staff including personal tutors.</p> <p>Continue promotion at the Deans addresses</p> <p>During this phase the scheme worked with HODs and Course Leaders to pilot specific course based approaches to mentoring organised by ADU</p> <p>Recommendation: Project is adopted and established as a university retention initiative.</p> <p>External Recognition – 6 HEI's approached Coordinator for advice on setting up own scheme</p> <p>3 HEI's consulted with Coordinator about their own schemes</p>	<p>3/4</p> <p>4/5</p> <p>5/6</p> <p>6/7</p>	<p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p> <p>Report</p>
Management Engagement	<p>Targeted marketing of the scheme has taken place during the Deans' address in freshers week</p> <p>HOD invited Coordinator to departmental roadshow with timetabled slots to talk to all students in the department about acting as a mentor</p> <p>Course leaders helped identify mentees – approach example of best practice</p> <p>Recommendation: Senior Management recognise the huge growth and potential of the scheme and offer tangible</p>	<p>4/5</p> <p>5/6</p>	<p>Report</p> <p>Report</p>



	financial support to enable ongoing delivery.		
	Coordinator mapped 06/7 report against University objectives from Medium Term strategy 2007-17. Mentors and Mentees completed an on-line survey with 36% response rate	6/7 6/7	Report Report
Mentors views	84% felt that being a mentor would help them in the future 86% of mentors agreed the role had helped developed own organisational skills 89.5% of mentors agreed had developed own communication skills 95% totally agreed they and developed better approaches to time management as a result 83% were actively using action planning and PDP  93% mentors stated that mentoring other students had been a key experience for them	4/5        6/7	SQ        SQ
How evidence is used	Reports are submitted to the Director of Student Services, The Academic Development Unit, PVC ( Academic)		

Source: Mentoring Scheme Reports to the University 2003-7

## **Appendix 7. Abbreviations and Acronyms**

ADU	Academic Development Unit
AM	Attendance Monitor
ASS	Academic Study Skills
BME	Black Minority Ethnic
CERUK	Current Education and Children's Research
CMO	Context – Mechanism - Outcome
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DO	Data Officer
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
EBP	Evidence Based Practice
EIPP	Evidence Informed Policy and Practice
EPPI	The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre
FDTL	Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning
FE	Further Education
FET	Faculty Executive Team
FRR	Faculty Retention Report
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HOD	Head of Department
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MIS	Management Information System
NSSE	National Survey of student Engagement
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PAL	Peer Assisted Learning
PDP	Personal Development Planning
PVC	Pro Vice Chancellor
RCT	Random Controlled Trial
RT	Retention Tutor
SO	Student Officer

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